Is Improved Access Really Necessary?

The NHS Constitution: a Consultation on New Patients’ Rights, was published on November 10, with a Government pledge that everyone wanting NHS dental access should have it by Spring 2011.

The document states: “There have been problems with NHS dentistry access since the early 1990s. Our 2006 dental reforms have given PCTs the power to contract dental services to meet local needs. In order to expand services wherever they are needed, we have set up a national dental access programme, headed by Dr Mike Warburton, to support the NHS in further improving access.

We have also accepted recommendations from the independent review led by Professor Jimmy Steele published in June 09, to improve long-term access and quality.”

Recommendations also include linking some of dentists’ income to registered NHS patients and encouraging preventive care advice. The right to private treatment is proposed, if a patient cannot access an NHS specialist within 18 weeks, after referral.

But Eddie Crouch, Birmingham LDC secretary, has hit out at what he regards as the Department of Health’s (DH) ‘blanket policy’ to improve country-wide NHS dental access. He says registration in the early 90s was never cross referenced, hence figures are likely to be inaccurate and inflated.

He thinks Government money would be better spent on real problems. “In South Birmingham PCT, it’s been decided we need 23,000 new NHS dentistry patients. But there are simply not that amount of people waiting for an NHS dentist.

“However, many patients complain that orthodontic, periodontal and endodontic treatments are plain that orthodontic, periodontal and endodontic treatments are hard to access and home-visits for housebound patients and nursing home residents are inadequately funded. Surely money would be better spent on real problems.”

Mr Crouch also thinks the time-span for PCTs to make comprehensive needs assessments is too short. But he adds: “I have sympathy with the pressure PCTs are under, they are unlikely to want to object to pressure from central Government, even if they agree with local dentists.”

He is awaiting a response from a letter, drafted to Ann Keen, minister responsible for dentists and LibDem MP, John Hemmings, has said: “We are committed to providing the right kind of dental care and want to ensure everyone has a say in how that service functions in the future.”

DH figures released in August showed that 720,000 more NHS dental patients accessed services in the four quarters ending June 09. Courses of treatment in 2009/09 increased by four per cent (1.4 million) from the previous year and UDAs were up 5.7 per cent.

Chief Dental Officer for England, Dr Barry Cockcroft says access is not only about procurements, but also covers improved contracting and better communication. He says: “How needs are tackled is also about social and cultural education, not just more services. It is important to get the right message through.”