This week it was the health department’s turn to answer oral questions and Tim Farron the Lib Dem MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale asked the secretary of state about a practice due to lose on the retirement of its secretary of state about a practice due to close on the retirement of its secretary of state, Alan Johnson, that the practice in Ambleside in my constituency served 5,000 NHS dental patients across a geographical area of more than 90 square miles. The PCT in Cumbria is planning to close down the Ambleside practice in March next year, when the current dentist retires.

‘Given that already 50 per cent of my constituents do not have access to an NHS dentist’, he continued, ‘does the Secretary of State agree that the PCT in Cumbria should ensure that the NHS dental practice in Ambleside remains open?’

Unusually Alan Johnson himself replied saying that PCTs had an obligation to ensure that there is proper dental provision in their areas. ‘Under the new procedures and contract, the PCT is obliged to ensure that proper NHS dental provision is available,’ he said and pledged that if the MP would like to write to him about the issue he would look into it.

Whether this promise has any effect remains to be seen, but the PCT seems to be digressing its feet in. It was reported in local media that a South Lakes dental practice had stepped in to try to prevent the practice closure, but had had its offer to treat NHS patients turned down.

Grange Dental announced that it was taking over the premises of NHS dentist Mike Hynes when he retires in spring next year. But the plans to provide cover for his 3000 patients has been rejected by the Cumbria PCT.

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Sir Paul Beresford, dentist and Conservative MP asked whether there had been discussions he has had with the General Dental Council on whether dental bleaching might be carried out by qualified hygienists or qualified dental auxiliaries after training by a dentist either in a surgery or at a patient’s home using surgery supplied equipment.

Replying, minister Ann Keen said that dentistry was self-regulating and the GDC was independent of Government. She understood that the GDC considers that tooth whitening constitutes the practice of dentistry and that only registered dentists are suitably trained and competent to carry it out. She continued: ‘Dental professionals are required to practice within their respective professional boundaries and to only undertake work which they are trained and competent to do. However, she understood that the GDC was currently reviewing the scope of practice of dentists and dental care professionals and expected to consult on its proposals in 2008.

Sir Paul also asked what changes to the system of dental contracts the NHS Dental Contract Implementation Group had introduced in the last 12 months, and what changes they plan to introduce in the next 12 months. Ann Keen, however, told him that the group’s function was to monitor and provide feedback to the Department on the implementation of the reforms. It was for the Department rather than the group to make or plan policy changes.