Did Channel 4 Dispatch the truth?

Dental Tribune looks at the latest programme to highlight NHS dentistry

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o, The Truth About Your Dentist has been aired and been the topic of many a conversation between colleagues in the dental practice.

The Channel 4 Dispatches programme was broadcast last month and attracted a combined viewing of approximately 1.1m people between the original broadcast and +1. Despite the original misgivings of many within the profession, the programme was not the dentist bashing one-sided affair that was expected – in fact may dental professionals have said that it has helped to draw attention to some of the flaws of the Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) remuneration system.

Dental Tribune has spoken to some of the dentists who appeared on the programme, as well as receiving comment from dental professionals.

No sensationalist negativity

Dr Gareth McAleer, dental practitioner and contributor to the Dispatches programme, commented: “There were several dentists involved in the making of the programme. We wanted to make sure there was none of the sensationalist negativity often seen with other programmes; this is often because the profession doesn’t get involved in the making of programmes such as these and so there is often only one side presented.

“In my opinion there seems to have been a lot of research done in the beginning; first the filmmakers called a number of practices, and then chose practices to send mystery shoppers to. As the research progressed, it was obvious to the filmmakers that they were indeed on to something.”

Dr McAleer was full of praise for his dental colleagues who agreed to be part of the programme and give the profession a voice: “It was great that the dentists who came onto the programme didn’t hold back explaining the problems of the system – this gave the programme balance. There was a lot of negativity from certain members of the profession before the programme came out – they didn’t give it a chance.

Honesty and integrity

“The reason the dentists featured were chosen were because they came across with a depth of honesty and integrity, showing that not all dental professionals were like those who had been filmed in their practices. This was to let the public see that although there are some dentists who are not wholly ethical, there are plenty out there who are.”

Dr McAleer also gave his opinion about the current state of NHS dentistry: “I believe the government needs to listen to what dentists are telling them; we told them in 2006 that the system would fail, and if they don’t listen to dentists now, that there needs to be a completely new system implemented for NHS dentistry to work, then it is a criminal waste of time and money piloting a system we already know will fail.

“The issues surrounding dentistry today are much too big to be covered in one programme – even the filmmakers acknowledged that – so don’t be surprised if there is a part II to this story!”

Also featured in The Truth About Your Dentist was Dr Tony Kilcoyne, Specialist in Prosthodontics based in Haworth, West Yorkshire and an elected dental member of the GDC Council. Speaking to Dental Tribune, Dr Kilcoyne said that all comments given at interview were his own personal opinion and done in isolation to other parts of the programme, so until it was broadcast he wasn’t sure if, or what, would be included in the final programme.

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“Whilst the adverts for it focused on the title, The Truth about your Dentist several days beforehand, the expectation was that this would highlight dentists as being the worst culprit for the continuous problems that beset NHS dentistry in England. However whilst the programme raised concerns whether some dentists offered everything the NHS contract requires, an equally strong theme was the failings of the existing UDA system itself, which simply isn’t designed to deliver complex or time-consuming dental care, such as molar endodontics or prolonged periodontal gum treatments, let alone additional time for important areas such as prevention.”

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**The programme was, of course, sensational and biased against dentists since this is what is thought to attract audiences**

Having watched the programme, dentist Ian Gordon said: "It is often uncomfortable for a profession to be subjected to journalistic scrutiny. It takes real courage to be interviewed for a programme such as Dispatches, patient with perhaps two or three failing crowns and a broken filling or two and a loose CoG denture round practices for treatment planning - the various treatment plans obtained and the reason for the prescribed treatment would have been interesting to see."

Dr Gordon continued: "In 2006 I founded CHALLENGE along with Eddie Crouch and John Ben- shaw. We campaigned against nGDS and predicted all the outcomes that we now know baffle the dental service. Deskilling, supervised neglect, gaming, PCT inflexibility... it was all obvious."

"I suggested at LDC conference in 2008 that extractions had increased and root fillings decreased. At the time the CDO challenged this and said there is always the risk of being misrepresented."

"Overall I feel the programme was balanced and revealed nothing more than what I would have expected. My only criticism of the dentists who were interviewed would be reserved for Dr Anthony Halperin, the expert witness, who dismissed molar RCT as a simple procedure. This was unfair and disingenuous. Dentists can make RCT straightforward with years of experience and with use of additional equipment, but it is always a procedure with uncertain outcomes even in the most expert of hands."

"The programme highlighted the enormous difficulty of offering private treatment to NHS patients especially for RCT and there is no registration, there is no registration, there is no registration."

"I feel that those who are providing for example scales privately rather than on the NHS should not have signed the new contract. You cannot have your cake and eat it, and I feel the PCTs should have taken a more aggressive stance in the past to stamp out this gaming. I hope now that this is stamped out, and the practices that are doing this realise that instead of hiding behind the lack of knowledge of the public, they become open and honest about what is funding the treatment and how."

He added: "I am also concerned that the concept of full lists is being used to stop patients accessing the service. There is no registration, there is no access to a full list. If a patient needs a dentist the contract obliges you to take them on as a patient. This fact is the reason why I refused to sign the contract and converted in 2005. But that's for another day and another Dispatches programme probably."

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**Change on horizon**

"The CDO sometimes seemingly single-handedly supported nGDS and the clumsy way some of the dentists attempted to "sell" private treatment did nothing for the reputation of themselves or the profession."

"Dispatches could have exposed more issues than they did. Had they sent a moderate needs