Dentists are waiting...

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And about time too. Two major Government announcements are expected at any moment. Both, however, have been expected for quite some time.

While some of the more speculative content of this article may have been superseded by the time it is published, past experience suggests that holding one's breath might be medically inadvisable...

Readers with particularly good long-term memories may remember a Health Minister who went by the name of Alan Milburn. At the BDA's National Dental Conference in the spring of 1998, he announced that the Government would unveil a brand, spanking new strategy for NHS dentistry later that year. A couple of years and re-shuffles later, that up-and-coming, tipped-for-high-office Blair loyalist has become Secretary of State for Health – and the UK's dentists are still waiting...

An incurable optimist might suggest that the long wait was an indication of the seriousness with which the Government views this issue. Certainly, it is not inconceivable that the strategy proved more complicated than was originally envisaged, and the Department of Health wanted to make sure it was genuinely comprehensive.

More sceptical readers may prefer the view that dentistry just is not a high enough priority for this Government. Whatever the truth of the matter – and some seasoned commentators have suggested that the Government simply wants a strategy which will not cost anything – we should, perhaps, be grateful that they are looking at NHS dentistry at all. It seems to have been around 52 years since any politician did. But can we guess enough about the strategy to know whether we will like it when we see it?

A speech by Health Minister Lord Hunt at Dentistry 2000 confirmed several things we already either knew or suspected. Dental Access Centres and the role of the NHS Direct phone line will be important elements of the strategy, together with loyalty payments, an increased role for PCDs and a requirement that dentists will monitor and improve quality. The

one thing which is lacking so far – and which we almost certainly will not discover until the great unveiling is the single, unifying idea which knits the whole strategy together.

We know, of course, that what drives the strategy is Blair's commitment to give everyone access to NHS dentistry by September next year. Lord Hunt's speech gave delegates a pretty full summary, but did not tell us the 'vision thing', the element of the document which grabs the imagination and (more importantly) which generates headlines. If all that is added to the

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final version is 'spin', the profession may be forgiven if its collective response is not 'About time too' but 'Is that it?'

Commons debate

The Conservative opposition held a debate in the House of Commons on 29 July proposing the motion that, 'for the great majority of the British people, the NHS has got worse, not better, under this Labour Government'. Julia Drown, loyalist Labour MP for Swindon, said 'Local dentists now accept NHS patients and thousands of people have been added to their lists; by contrast, when Labour was elected, not a single dentist in Swindon took adult NHS patients. That shows how far we have come in three years.' Whether or not it was these words which swayed her colleagues, Labour comfortably won

the day.

Water fluoridation

Publication of the 'once and for all' review of the evidence on water fluoridation, originally ordered by former Health Secretary Frank Dobson, is due this month. Or possibly early next month. The NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination can perhaps be forgiven for any delay. They are rumoured to have examined more than 250 studies – apparently narrowed down from over 3,000 trials, only 700 of which were relevant to humans and drinking water.

It is also said that of the 250-odd which met basic study design criteria, precisely none were randomised controlled trials. Advance word says that the York team will come down on the side of fluoridation – but most commentators agree that the Government will face a battle putting it into action.

Mr Dobson's opus

News of 'Dobbo' himself has also filtered out in recent weeks. During the London mayoral campaign, Dobson seemed positively carefree – reasoning perhaps that he did not really need to exert himself, his campaign having been scuppered by Labour's ill-advised attempts to nobble the unstoppable Ken Livingstone.

Since then, however, his attitude is said to have hardened to the extent that he is preparing a memoir about his 'mistreatment'. Number 10 would have privately dismissed this as mere rumour, but for a report in *Private Eye* which suggested that kindly uncle Frank's working title is a phrase from *Macbeth*, and Dobson is known to be an enthusiastic and knowledgeable Shakespeare fan. Perhaps Mr Blair is supposed to get a subliminal message from the fact that 'the Scottish play' concerns a popular leader brought low by his own treachery.

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