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## Holiday snaps

Much has been made in the media recently about the apparently growing exodus of patients seeking cheaper dental treatment abroad. There are several reasons given for this, none of which should surprise us particularly but some of which should give us, and certainly some of our potential future patients, cause to pause for thought.

The debacle over the new NHS dental contract has certainly drawn huge coverage in the press on television and radio. One is left wondering the extent to which this is the combined muscle of the media using it as a convenient stick with which to beat the government in general, and over the NHS in particular, as much as being in sympathy with the future of UK oral health and probably less so, the dental profession. Nevertheless, the resulting publicity has prompted many patients to raise the subject with their dentists and the cost of non-NHS treatment has unquestionably been part of those discussions for most.

Value for money is obviously a factor, which is wholly understandable. It is human nature to want to try and get services or goods for the cheapest price possible and in a consumer age when tools, such as the Internet, are more readily available than ever to allow information exchange and price comparison it is to be expected that opportunities will be generated and seized to exploit this.

As with all comparisons though, the important aspect is being sure that one is comparing like with like. Is it the same microwave in the High Street shop and on the web? Is the quality of the hotel in the glossy brochure the same as that on a bargain card in a travel agent's window? Comparison also requires assembling information. The corollary is that a lack of knowledge often increases risk.

What are the risks? Some are immediately obvious. When you buy at a distance the opportunities to take the goods back, complain about the service or receive post-purchase satisfaction are necessarily more

difficult. What are one's 'rights' following treatment abroad? Are they subject to greater safeguards within EC countries? What about beyond Europe; China, the USA?

I am not in any way casting doubts or aspersions on colleagues in, or from, any other countries than the UK. What I am doing is asking how such arrangements as we are now seeing might adversely affect patients who pay for them. But apart from patient safety and satisfaction, there is also the matter of who puts right what might possibly go awry when the patient cannot or will not return to the practitioner abroad who provided their care? Proximity dictates it will be a dentist here in the UK, in the patient's local town or city, as close as possible. How do we stand in such circumstances? Do we stop at merely treating the immediate problem? Do we take them on in sympathy? Do we get involved in international legal battles as a result of claims of negligence? Irrespective of the care provided, the law of probability dictates that it can only be a matter of time until such cases start to be brought.

However, there is a further aspect of 'going outside the UK' that also requires consideration. We have battled for nearly a century now to have dentistry registered as a profession, regulated as a profession and respected as a profession. We initiated vocational training, we have our own health support mechanisms for colleagues with problems, we grasped the nettle of continuing professional development; the list is long. What is the logical end point of all these actions and initiatives? A profession in which the public can have faith and confidence that the care it receives is as safe, up-to-date and is provided to as a high a standard as possible. How many holiday snaps are we yet to see from jurisdictions in which not all such safeguards are enshrined in law and in the care provided?

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