



‘Sorry, we’re extremely busy right now’



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At the beginning of the year, I sat down and thought to myself ‘David, we’ve been talking dental politics for decades. It’s time to change it up unless something of note happens’. And so I sketched out some anchor ideas for issues throughout the year mixed in with room for *ad hoc* comment on the issue of the day.

That lasted roughly nine days. Perhaps a little longer than some new year diets and promises of dry January (points at self), but reader, I think it’s worth it.

On 9 January during a debate in the House of Commons, in response to questions from Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Wes Streeting on when we can expect to see the unicorn Dental Recovery Plan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Public Health, Start for Life and Primary Care) Andrea Leadsom said it would be published shortly. When asked to clarify what that meant, Leadsom said the following:

‘Shortly is a little shorter than in due course and a little longer than imminently.’

I wonder if the Rt Hon lady had a temporary moment of confusion thinking she was speaking to a disgruntled customer whose delivery was late, or to someone who’d broken down at the side of the road in horrible weather and was waiting for a recovery vehicle. What does that even mean? Sure, it’s a combination of words thrown together to form a sentence – not a coherent

one, but one presumes that’s besides the point. The Dental Recovery Plan was pledged to be published in April 2023. We’re two months short of a year. ‘A little longer than imminently’? No sh*t, Sherlock.

It really is a travesty. Thanks to years of underfunding and clawback leading to an access crisis beyond comparison, dentistry is now on the lips of constituents and their MPs. Easier to get Taylor Swift tickets than a dental appointment, Ashley Dalton, the Labour MP for West Lancashire, said. Patients deserve better than word salads. The profession deserves better.

It is leading to a palpable feeling of ‘the Government just doesn’t care’ amongst the profession. Little wonder migration patterns indicate a move to private. I have lost track of how many times Ministers have been urged to correct the record while offering up untruths and fictional musings of ‘funding and more dentists than ever before’. It simply isn’t true. It would be far simpler for the Government of today to come out and say ‘there’s no money, no appetite and no need – we’ll just bump up patient charges’. Brutal as it would be, you cannot help thinking that’s the reality of the situation and those are the sentiments being left unsaid.

Before writing this, I pondered what the solution would be. Turning all Ministers into wooden *Pinocchio* toys whose noses grew when they lie would be a start, if a tad unrealistic. The dental community coming together to ‘community note’ and correct untruths on a social platform? Time-consuming and largely ineffective, if amusing. Having one Secretary of State in the post for longer than the shelf life of a loaf of bread would help – the

patience displayed by those in meetings and negotiations with Government officials should be admired. They’d be millionaires if they could bottle and sell it.

Money? That would certainly help, but I settled on appetite. Anyone on the outside looking at what’s going on would question whether there’s any appetite at all to turn NHS dentistry around. Something shortly, in due course or a little longer than imminently would help. You only need to look at the findings of the Health Select Committee and their recommendations – they were similar to the last report. Has anything really changed in the interim? Yes: things are much worse. The trickle-down effect means more people doing DIY dentistry, more people in hospital taking up unnecessary space and resources. More people dodging a visit altogether because they can’t afford it. More people with complex needs finding their wait times increasing because of the recruitment crisis. The system is just broken from top to bottom, held together with years-old duct tape and the will of dental professionals unwilling to turn their back on patients.

Then again, maybe it’s us that are the problem, the baddies. Maybe the Under Secretary of State is in the right and we just haven’t seen the light yet. Maybe it’s our fault dentistry is broken, cast adrift like a car submerged in feet of snow by the side of the road. Silly us for not realising. With nonsensical statements like ‘shortly is a little shorter than in due course and a little longer than imminently’, does dentistry have any chance of being rescued? ♦

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