

## 2023 and all that

Shaun Sellars continues his series on ethical dilemmas in dentistry which appears in every second issue of the *BDJ*.



And so we crash into 2023 without taking a breath. Around us, the NHS continues to struggle with strike action planned or threatened by nurses, ambulance workers and junior doctors as the country goes through a second winter of discontent. But where does that leave dentistry?

If the last few years have told me anything, it's that trying to predict the future is a fruitless task, but here I am doing precisely that. However, I can be pretty sure that we're not going to strike. Not only is the profession more challenging to bring together than a clowder of cantankerous cats, but it's also probable any action would be restricted to those in salaried services. Self-employed general dentists are less likely to want to or be able to stay away from patients, especially in the associate-driven corporates, which underpin a significant amount of NHS provision. And limiting strike action to mainly hospital and community dentists would minimise the disruption caused while affecting those

most in need, bringing the legitimacy of any strike action into question.

However, this may change if there's a shift in how we work. General dentists' self-employed status has long been a grey area, especially for associates. HMRC guidelines on this are due to be revised this year. Although little may change, this, along with the recent rulings on the vicarious liability of practice owners, may see an increase in salaried GDP posts being offered.

Life as an employee would be very different for many dentists. Still, for some, especially young dentists and those returning from a career break, the added job security, guaranteed income, and reduced contact with HMRC may be welcomed, even if that salary is lower than what they're used to. For practice owners, there's the benefit of reduced legal exposure, even if it means more complex accounting. It's a model already partially in use in some corporates, and one which we can expect to expand in that sector and possibly spill over into the independent market.

But, of course, talk of strike action is irrelevant because 2023 is, so we are told, the year of contract reform. If you believe that, I've got a bridge to sell you. In reality, dentistry is far down the pecking order when it comes to NHS funding. The enhanced UDA rate for complex treatment was delayed. Therapists are still unable to open their own courses of NHS treatment, despite this being announced months ago. In a world without funding to give inflation-linked pay rises to doctors, nurses and ambulance staff, we shouldn't expect any form of contract uplift soon. On the plus side, the political situation appears to be more stable than last year. With a general election in the minds of many in power, there is a good chance that dentistry will become a talking point which may even push that contract reform through. Without it, dentists and patients may be in for a tough year.

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## PM mythmaking on crisis in NHS dentistry

The British Dental Association (BDA) has urged Rishi Sunak to correct the record, after he offered a wholesale misrepresentation of the crisis facing NHS dentistry at Prime Minister's Questions on 11 January.

In response to questions on patient access from Lancaster and Fleetwood's Cat Smith MP, the Prime Minister claimed: 'as a result of the new reformed NHS dentistry contract there are now more NHS dentists across the UK with more funding making sure people can get the treatment they need.'

The BDA have stressed that not one of the PM's claims is accurate. Each of these claims was subsequently repeated in exchanges with Wakefield MP Simon Lightwood. The ongoing exodus from the NHS workforce saw 24,272 dentists

perform NHS activity in England during 2021/22, lower than levels seen in 2017/18.

The BDA does not consider recent tweaks to the discredited NHS system as a 'new contract', given formal negotiations on substantive change have yet to begin. These minor changes – which had no new funding attached – are unlikely to increase access or improve workforce retention. The budget for dentistry has been subject to a decade of savage real terms cuts, and with inflation at record levels the BDA estimate it would take an extra £1.5 billion a year simply to restore resources to 2010 levels.

Last year the PM pledged to 'restore' NHS dentistry by ringfencing its funding, strengthening prevention and encouraging dentists to stay in the health service. He stated: 'my five-point plan will be activated on day one to free up dentistry professionals to do

their jobs, encourage NHS trained dentists to stay in the NHS, and focus on prevention as that is always better than the cure.'

There is no evidence any element of the plan has been taken forward. Research undertaken by the BBC over last summer indicated nine out of ten practices in England are unable to take on new adult NHS patients. The Health and Social Care Committee is currently taking evidence for an inquiry into the access crisis.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'The Prime Minister has offered a grotesque misrepresentation of a crisis facing millions. Our patients are living with the reality.

'The facts are there are no new dentists, no new contract and no new money. All we've seen are tweaks at the margins. We need honesty, ambition and investment to save a service on its last legs.'