Trading environments

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EDITORIAL

For sometime now we have been hearing and reading predictions that the environment in which we work will change and will change quite fundamentally. Several pieces of news have recently served to underline the pace at which these changes are taking place. We reported in the previous issue the rather bizarre, but unquestionably entrepreneurial, move by a company based in Lincolnshire to provide information on dental services available in Hungary by touring the UK with an inflatable surgery. Potential patients are invited for a consultation for a small fee, which is refundable if they subsequently take up the treatment plan in Hungary.

In another development, a UK colleague has announced that he will be opening a dental surgery in a branch of Sainsbury's supermarket in Sale, near Manchester, which will be situated near the check-out (see page 299). Offering check-ups and treatment on a private basis, this might be seen as merely a variant on the types of care variously provided in recent years in other High Street stores. However, the specific entry into the market (I use the word market deliberately) of a major supermarket with the financial muscle, power and marketing strength that is a feature of their trading profile has to be seen as a significant occurrence.

The third of the innovations is the practice now owned in East Anglia by a Dental Care Professional (DCP). This has been made possible by changes in legislation concurrent with the compulsory registration of DCPs from 1 August 2008 and to amendments to the regulation of Bodies Corporate within the Dentists Act. In essence it allows DCPs, or others, to buy, set up and own dental practices and to employ the necessary team members, including dentists.

QUITE INTERESTING OR FUNDAMENTALLY IMPORTANT?

Each of these developments might be passed off dismissively in various ways. Not everyone wants to travel abroad for care, who would want to see a dentist in a supermarket? and one DCP owning a practice is hardly a cause for widespread concern. With more than enough to fill our time as it is, all this might be viewed as 'quite interesting', slightly amusing and mildly arresting but does it impact on our own practices? The temptation is to say that it does not but in reality I believe that even if the individual circumstances do not then the trend definitely does and the implications certainly should.

But this is to make us aware rather than to offer the information as a being a danger. We should view this as challenging

rather than threatening and the very last thing we should do is to feel that we are the victims of an irresistible force that is heading straight for us with its headlights full on. Being in practice, and being in business, is about maintaining livelihood and foreseeing future difficulties and opportunities. Each of the initiatives that I cite above has potential consequences on both scores. Your patients might be lured away by cheaper treatment in Eastern Europe, more convenient appointment times at a supermarket surgery or more a sympathetically managed or preventively oriented practice owned by a non-dentist.

On the positive side you might react instead by asking your patients if they are happy with the service your practice provides. Are appointment times convenient, do patients perceive that they get good service and good value for money, what more would they like to see and experience in what you offer? You will need to find out if dental tourism is a growing trend in your locality or specialty and whether your fees are in line with those of other colleagues for equivalent services and treatments. They may be lower or higher, there is no right or wrong, but are they justifiable, are they competitive, do they stand-up to scrutiny in the trading environment in which we unquestionably find ourselves? We may not like the idea of having to compete for our patients' discretionary spending power but it is a reality nonetheless. Surrounded as we currently are by the media's unrelenting doom and gloom slant on economic meltdown, credit crunching and falling property prices, and because we now, on average, earn more of our income from non-NHS fees than at any time since the beginning of the NHS, there is a serious case to be considered that we will start to find that the financial downturn may affect us more directly.

Being aware of all these factors and acting on them will help to make us stronger not only in the immediate future but also in the longer term. The signs have been gathering over a number of years but the increased change of pace means that we do now ignore these warnings at our peril. We should not, dare not and must not risk being left behind because we do not like the trend or because we choose to believe that it won't happen to us.

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.840