EDITORIAL

A question of loyalties

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The recent news that BUPA have acquired Oasis for £835 million raises questions for dentists and, dare I say, patients. And I question that terminology only because the 'industry' vernacular appears stubbornly to prefer to regard those who seek dental care as 'customers'. In the rubric surrounding the sale, the quotes of those involved clearly underlined this preference:

BUPA UK Managing Director, David Hynam, said *'There's strong customer demand for high-quality, value-for-money dental services that are convenient and easy to use. BUPA and Oasis have a shared commitment to putting customers first...'*

Oasis CEO, Justin Ash, said: *'...Our growth is accelerating and enthusiasm is building amongst dentists and customers...'* He went on to praise *'...the loyalty of our two million customers...'*

Of course we have seen similar language before from the pen of the, now seemingly untouchable, chair of the GDC: *'...using customer power to reshape dentistry would be an example to the rest of the NHS that market forces could work in healthcare...'* He then went on to applaud the potential development of dentistry into a Lidl to Waitrose type spread.

Unpicking the comments, the ones that leap out are *'strong customer demand for high-quality, value-for-money dental services that are convenient and easy to use'* and *'the loyalty of our two million customers...'*

Now don't get me wrong, I completely favour accessibility. I also support market competition. No one can question the value of the refurbishments to practices overseen by the corporate providers. But the proprietorial 'ownership' of the loyalty of patients? Undoubtedly, it is the case that nicely decked out surgeries are more pleasant than tired ones. But is that the real driver of loyalty? Or might it be more relationship-based? And remember that many of those relationships will long predate the presence of the current 'owner'.

Then looking at the things that dentists do

for their patients – are they really something that can properly be described as 'being used'? When it comes to the much abused 'value for money' reference, my worry is that to many people it means cheap. As any dentist qualifying currently will tell you achieving the status of a dentist is anything but cheap. Those doing so need to have a reasonable expectation of covering their many thousands of pounds of personal investment. That in turn translates into an expectation of reasonable rates of fees for practising their skill.

My worry, in a world where all the commercial efforts appear to downgrade the personal relationship and skill, is that this expectation will become subsumed as merely a variable cost of service delivery. I am concerned that the necessary evil of paying dentists will become an opportunity to

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enhance profit by driving labour rates down. And with a supply-side surplus in the dentist market, an unintelligent owner may pursue such a route before realising the potential it has for destroying share-holder value.

At its heart sits the fact that while commercial people will tell you that all business is the same they also adjust the facts to fit their own expectations. This pre-occupation with oversimplifying the clinical relationship, and for shoe-horning one activity into the language of another does not change the fundamentals. The commercial world is full of examples where corporate consolidators have chosen to misunderstand the freedom of choice exercised by those who avail

themselves of personal services. New owners have often considered their 'brand loyalty' more important than relationships of trust and personal preference. The rebound of the artisans has repeatedly proved them wrong.

In our own case the 'thing' for sale is neither a commodity nor homogeneous. It is dentists themselves and their personal qualities of competence, care and communication. It is those personal characteristics that build loyalty and that loyalty is personal, not corporate.

So, some cautionary words to the new management: *The dentists are your 'product'. You may want to 'sell' them to 'customers'. And if they stay they may well generate substantial returns for you. The challenge is that they are highly differentiated, highly skilled professionals who do not all work in the same way. If you can harness and glory in that differentiation and retain high*

quality dentists by treating and rewarding them properly then there is a path to mutual benefit.

On the other hand, if you see the dentists as the squashable meat in the sandwich for short-term gain, you may just destroy the business altogether. Such an outcome, following a massive investment would not be in the interests of BUPA, dentists or patients.

The BDA will await developments on this one. While the rhetoric around the sale is patronising, let's hope it's a passing phase and that BUPA builds on what it does well in serving the administration of healthcare services. Let's hope, equally, the management doesn't allow corporate hubris to destroy what it has just bought. ■

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