EDITORIAL

Dentistry Jim: But not as we know it!

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There is a quiet revolution going on. It is being described in vague, bland and reassuring tones. It is based upon pre-determined dogma and a solution that looks as if it has been designed before a full evaluation of the problem.

The revolution is being masterminded by Health Education England (HEE) and is in the context of how dentistry is to be delivered in the future. The preconception seems to be that dentists are expensive and troublesome and that DCPs are much cheaper and will do as they are told. This initiative is not in the distant undergrowth, it is being championed by the Chair of the Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors (COPDEND) and the Office of the English Chief Dental Officer.

The process began with an 'invitation-only' kick-off meeting in Liverpool in late September 2017. The invitees were described by HEE as 'a balanced group of knowledgeable individuals'. Those individuals were addressed by some of the project team for the Advancing Dentistry Project (now renamed 'Advancing Dental Care') described as 'experts with vision and breadth of knowledge in their field'. There was little opportunity to ask questions (an online system for questions was moderated) and there was no time at the end of the event to go through these. If the title of the project sounds big, its intentions are even bigger. A very slick video infographic has been produced by HEE (www.hee.nhs.uk).

You will see that the essence of this project is to take work away from dentists and put it into the hands of the other members of the dental team. As the presentation by the Chair of COPDEND shows, the main thrust of the initiative is getting more for less; 18 slides in you will find a slide entitled 'Taxpayers Money'. It depicts a bag of money currently paying for a small number of 'NHS Dental Clinicians' and then the same sized bag of

money paying for a much larger number of the same. The footer says 'increased opportunities for DH contract reform' despite slide 10 telling participants 'It is not about... the GDS or PDS contract'.

In determining who can do what, the project team has taken Jimmy Steele's hierarchy of dentally related activity and aligned different professional groups with each of the strata. It would appear that the only residual role for the 'general dentist' is the provision of urgent care and pain relief. Everything else can be done by someone else with the accompanying BSA data seeming to suggest that 63% of dental work can reasonably be given to others.

From all of this it appears that the die is cast and that the answer is to circumvent the

March 2018. The inappropriately short time scale means that despite a few attempts at raising awareness by the organisers and others there remains a very low awareness across the profession of what may transpire to be the biggest sea-change in dentistry for over fifty years. This wouldn't be the first time that the 'direction of travel' had been determined before true engagement with the profession had been undertaken.

It is both alarming and profoundly ironic that this set of measures is being moved forward just as those graduating from dental schools do so with unprecedented levels of debt. It is during their professional lifetimes that they will see serious challenges to either find remuneration commensurate with their personal investment or to earn enough to

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need for dentists, train more DCPs and then give them the NHS dental service to operate. The need for this is justified in the slide deck by reference to the fact that there have been 'endless academic papers on the viability of skill mix' and a 'need for change recognised by a large cohort in profession'. But the team provides selective references for one and none for the other. The experts on the project team all appear to have a strong interest in the advancement of DCPs and so it would seem that there is a strong anticipation about recommendations to be made.

The pre-determinedness of this review is underscored by the fact that the kick-off was in September 2017 and the report on the 'direction of travel' is to be written by

cover those debts. Similarly, the vast investments by taxpayers to train these individuals will be wasted as we see dental education oversimplified, modularised and delegated. And, when all goodwill amongst dentists has been finally dissipated, the officials will hitch their wagon to another group of professionals whom they consider to be cheaper and more easily manipulated.

Quite how that works with HEE's motto to 'support the delivery of excellent healthcare and health improvement to the patients and public of England by ensuring that the workforce of today and tomorrow has the right numbers, skills, values and behaviours, at the right time and in the right place' is anyone's guess. ■

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