

Donncha O'Carolan
Acting Chief Dental Officer



Department of
**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

An Roinn

**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

To: All General Dental Practitioners

Tel: 02890522940
Fax: 02890523283

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Dear Colleague

At the last contract negotiating meeting between the Department and the Dental Practice Committee of the British Dental Association (BDA) on 27 June 2007, it was agreed by both parties that a joint communiqué should be issued to the profession.

The purpose of this joint communiqué is to update the profession on how the negotiations are progressing and how the new contract is shaping up.

Attached is the agreed joint communiqué between the Department and BDA. I hope you find it informative.

DONNCHA O'CAROLAN

PROGRESS ON THE NEW DENTAL CONTRACT

You will be aware that negotiations on a new dental contract commenced between the Department of Health, Social Services and Social Services (DHSSPS) and the Dental Practice Committee (DPC) of the British Dental Association (BDA) in November 2006. At the outset it was agreed between both parties that matters discussed at these negotiations would be treated in confidence as is standard practice in these types of negotiations. However, both parties feel it is important to update the profession on progress made to date and the proposed timetable for implementation of the contract.

It is important at the outset to stress that DHSSPS **does not** intend simply introducing the English contract into Northern Ireland; DHSSPS are very aware of the problems experienced with the new contract in England and intend to learn from these.

The main differences which will set the new Northern Ireland contract apart from the new English contract are:

- The contract will be a regional dental contract commissioned by one regional body
- A clear definition of treatments which will be available under the health service – the essential services
- The contract will be a block contract but will not be measured in ‘Units of Dental Activity’ (UDAs)
- There will be a strong emphasis on prevention
- The new arrangements will be piloted before rolling out across Northern Ireland.

Expanding further on some of these points; while there will be local commissioning of services to ensure that dental services meet local needs, the actual contracting, administration and implementation will be delivered by one body across the region,. This should overcome the problems experienced in England where some PCTs were more adept than others in implementing the English contract.

In relation to essential services, the Primary Dental Care Strategy (PDCS) clearly states that *'the new arrangements should define clearly the treatments that will be available under the health service and the boundary between dentistry designed to improve health and dentistry designed to improve appearance'*. This will permit the profession and patients to be very clear about what health service dentistry is expected to deliver. There is a sub group of the negotiating team currently working on this area and we await the outcome.

Perhaps one of the most contentious elements of the new English contract has been the performance measures used, the UDAs. The BDA have made it very clear that they are opposed to UDAs being introduced and the DHSSPS have taken this on board. While the concept of the new contract is to provide a block payment that essentially buys the dentist's time rather than volume of output, it would not be possible to simply pay out public money without some measure of what the government is getting in return. In order to address this issue, the DHSSPS has commissioned Professor Ciaran O'Neill (health economist, QUB) to research appropriate performance measures which will allow us to pay dentists for their time, factor in prevention and target need, a very tall order! Professor O'Neill commenced his work in March 2007 and hopes to report back to the negotiating team in the autumn. To our knowledge, this is the first time that such research has been undertaken in the United Kingdom and we look forward to the results.

One of the criticisms of the English contract is that it is still very much rewards output and that prevention is not adequately remunerated. Part of Professor O'Neill's work will be to research how we can remunerate dentists for prevention. This is an important element of the new contract and both the DHSSPS and BDA are keen to strongly feature preventive care into the new contract in order to address the poor oral health record of our population.

Another important element that we are considering is the whole cost of running a dental practice. We understand that dentists strongly feel that this is a weakness in the current contract. The BDA is undertaking an extensive piece of work around this area and we would ask practitioners to support the BDA in this project.

As stated in the PDCS, the DHSSPS are committed to piloting the new arrangements before rolling out across Northern Ireland. Both parties regard this as an important step as it allows us to ensure that the arrangements are both workable and acceptable.

In terms of a timescale, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill which would allow us to introduce a new contract is currently passing through the Assembly and should be in place by October/November 2007. Negotiations will continue into next year and we hope to be in a position to set up some pilot sites during 2008. These pilots will need to run for at least a year and be evaluated so realistically it will be at least 2009/10 before any new contract can be rolled out in Northern Ireland. In the mean time the DHSSPS will work with the BDA to continue to support health service dental practices.

Finally, several dentists have requested that the DHSSPS engages directly with them to discuss the new contract and while we appreciate this interest it is important to stress that all negotiations on the new contract will be through the BDA and we would urge dentists to direct their views through their local BDA representatives or directly to the BDA Office in Belfast. We welcome all input.