Contracting with General Dental Services: a mixed-methods study on factors influencing responses to contracts in English general dental practice

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

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The NHS dental contract is an agreement between dental practitioners and local health service managers (until very recently Primary Care Trust commissioners) which sets out the type and amount of dental care they have to provide in exchange for a certain amount of money. The terms of the agreement have changed a number of times since contracts with dentists were first set up, because dentists have reacted to new contract rules in ways that were against the wishes of managers. Loopholes have been exposed where practitioners appear to exploit vagueness in the language of the contract to benefit their self-interest. Our study focuses not on the terms of the contract, but on describing what the self-interested view of dentists is, in contrast to commissioners, in order to better understand what an ideal form of contract should set out to achieve. We studied 16 dental and six medical practices in detail, as well as sending a questionnaire to dental practitioners. We compared dentists with medical practitioners to draw out issues which are particular to dental practices. We found that dentists have several concerns which they have to bear in mind in their work: being responsible for keeping the practice going for the sake of staff and patients, providing high-quality care according to professional standards, meeting management requirements such as targets set by managers and running their practice as a business in a profitable way. We found some of these aspects can conflict with each other, and with the main concerns of commissioners.
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