

THE GOOD OLD NEW OLD DAYS

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'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' So begins Dickens' novel *A tale of two cities*. Deceptively clever as so much of this literary master's writing, the apparent dichotomy of the two cities and the two times is sealed together with the unity of a single vision of the present. Depending on whether one's optimistic view of a glass half full sees it as the best, or the pessimist in one sees the glass half empty as the worst of times, it is nevertheless the same time; it represents merely a differing perception. In many ways dentistry in the UK is in a similar situation. With recently qualified dentists, foundation dentists and vocational dental practitioners, starting new jobs in the coming weeks it seems an appropriate time to interrogate this further.

I am struck by the number of occasions on which colleagues of a similar age to myself mention to me how dentistry isn't like it used to be. 'Not like it was when we qualified eh?' they venture, expecting that I will concur with their view and reminisce along similar lines; the lack of postgraduate support, the low to non-existent levels of regulation the opportunity to be far more entrepreneurial. Part of me agrees, of course, why wouldn't I? I remember among other things being flung out into clinical practice without the benefit of mentoring, wondering how it was that patients suddenly (to my mind) started to listen to me as an expert whereas days before they had doubted me as a student.

But representing the other side of the story, younger colleagues mention to me how often they hear older practitioners saying the same to them about the good old days, and how

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they don't really understand it; finding it somewhat bewildering because they really don't see it as true. For these young professionals the future looks good; but essentially it also looks different. In order to back this up *BDJ* readers are cordially invited to read the thoughts and enthusiasm for dentistry expressed by the current undergraduates in *BDJ Student* (www.bdjstudent.co.uk). Not only are the students full of optimism they also represent by far the largest number of dental student members the BDA has ever had, a very encouraging sign of future engagement, representation and strength of the Association and profession.

To provide substance to the background of these apparently converse views I would urge readers to visit two further resources both stemming from Professor Jimmy Steele's *tour de force* Anniversary Lecture at the BDA last month. These are the cover story in the August issue of *BDJ In Practice* (What is a dentist for?) and the video recording of the lecture itself available to BDA Members on the BDA website (www.bda.org) with CPD.

Amongst many other fascinating insights, Jimmy provided an overview of how and where dentistry in the UK originated and as importantly where it is likely to go in the future. The content and context explains exactly how the 'good old days' were what they were, with a massive backlog of need through decades of untreated caries and little preventive advice, coupled with rapidly developing technology, efficiencies and materials. Similarly some of those

same factors are now also influencing the future but this time around with falling levels of caries and with them falling requirements for dentistry 'as we know it' since the majority of the activity merely replaces and expands on previous dentistry.

Summer holidays often provide the opportunity to take stock. We head off to the beach, to family venues or ancient ruins with the expressed intention of not thinking about work. Leaving it all behind for time shared with loved ones, friends or just 'me' time. Yet as the vacation proceeds so thoughts of everyday life creep in, seeping uninvited around the edges of our consciousness. The luxury of time to ponder does enable us to indulge in some blue-sky thinking, the chance to process some of this important predictive information and relate it to our own practices, careers and livelihoods. It may well be worth building some thinking time around these issues and contemplating how the changes in disease profile, NHS contracts, skill mix in practice, patients' perceptions of oral health and general health, regulatory attitude and economic stability will impact on your future personal and professional development.

This is a theme that I return to quite frequently but with good reason. I believe that dentistry in the UK, and elsewhere in the world, will undergo some fundamental seismic shifts in the not too distant future and I do not want the profession to be scrambling to catch up with these changes; rather to be prepared for them. The preparation is needed by all of us at all ages and stages of our careers irrespective of whether we regard the old days or the new days as the best of times or the worst of times.

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2015.598