

Peter Ward: 'Membership organisations can thrive and prosper'



Peter Ward retired earlier this year from the position of Managing Director, BDA, having held this post and that of Chief Executive for over 14 years. Editor-in-Chief Stephen Hancocks talks to Peter about his life, times and further ambitions.

SH: Am I correct in thinking that dentistry was in your family and if so was your decision to be a dentist an inevitability or a deliberate choice?

PW: No, quite wrong! I was the first in my family to go to university and was the beneficiary of a bit a golden age that allowed working class students to access higher education. As a consequence, I didn't really have much idea about what I wanted to do. Our family doctor had a chat with me and suggested that with my A Levels, medicine would be a good idea. My performance in chemistry put paid to that idea and I happily settled into a place at Liverpool University to study dentistry. So more a series of happy accidents than a plan at that stage.

SH: Before becoming Chief Executive you had a varied career in different aspects of dentistry. Which of these informed your time at the BDA?

PW: By far and away, my 13 years as a 'wet-fingered' dentist influenced me most. In all the positions I have held since then I have thought to myself 'what would my colleagues in the surgery want to say ... ask ... do, given this opportunity?' I have been blessed with the opportunity to study subjects beyond the clinical including law,

business, economics and management. In doing so I have also been exposed to opinion formers and influencers. It has been a great privilege to use those skills and opportunities to present the dentists' case.

SH: Thinking back to when you were appointed can you recall what your goals and ambitions included?

PW: Coming from outside the Association I had views about the perceived relevance and value of the BDA and I set out my stall to seek to modernise and make it more current and attractive to members and prospective members. What I didn't know was that all membership organisations were beginning to discover that the social attitudes towards them in general were profoundly changing. Together with growing levels of student debt and the global financial collapse of 2008 this meant that pursuing the goals of value and relevance has proved more challenging than I could ever have imagined.

SH: The last 14 years have seen major changes in dentistry and the BDA. What are the most significant in your view?

PW: I think it is impossible to underestimate the destructive impact of the NHS contract

that was forced upon English and Welsh general dental practitioners in 2006. Its introduction was brutally oppressive and its unit of currency so predictably perverse as to beggar belief. The fact that the Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) still endures these many years later is a disgrace. Its description generates incredulity when properly described to those outside our world. Dentistry in the NHS in England and Wales has survived only as a result of the professional generosity of dentists and their commitment to patients. If those dentists had acted in their own interests they would have walked away.

SH: Clearly the UDA system is a frustration for you, on behalf of the profession. Do you think it will change any time soon?

PW: Contract reform is much discussed but little acted upon. I can understand why this is the case. The tables are so stacked in favour of government there is little motivation to move towards change with any alacrity. What alarms me is that even with the changes that are proposed the UDA still appears to be likely to survive. It is now ten years since the Minister for Dentistry, Lord Howe, described the UDA in very negative terms. For it to

endure as even part of the mechanism of payments to dentists is astonishing.

SH: Of which of the many changes and developments that you have brought about at the BDA are you most proud?

PW: Throughout my tenure I have maintained my wish to make the BDA more relevant and fit for purpose. In that ambition I helped the BDA's Board to address things like the governing structures

membership organisations can thrive and prosper but they need to modernise their approaches and connect in ways that align with the ways modern individuals engage and I have attempted to bring this thinking into the Association. It must be done in a way that generates sufficient perceived value to allow those connections to be funded.

SH: Very much in this vein, thanks to your guidance the advent of BDA

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of the BDA, the shape of the management, the way members access membership and the range of offerings that are available. Individually some of those elements may not be visible or immediately popular, but taken together I think I leave the BDA more ready to provide a relevant range of services to dentists of future generations.

As I said earlier, the global changes in social attitudes have led to a re-examination of what membership organisations are for. Easy and free access to information and individual communications mean that the need for old-style meetings and published materials has declined and changed. What hasn't changed is the need for trusted sources and empathetic communities. My view is that

Indemnity is clearly seen as a game changer for dentists and for the BDA. What promoted you to think of this and have you enjoyed the process of bringing it to fruition?

PW: Essentially BDA Indemnity was the result of listening to our members and the wider dental profession. As part of our normal triennial process we do wide soundings as to what is on people's minds. When we did that in 2017 we received a loud clear message that the extant indemnity provisions were creaking and failing. We listened to that feedback and explored a variety of ways that we might address the problem. In the end, we concluded that a BDA branded bespoke solution was the only credible answer. The

exercise of pulling together the necessary teams and individuals, and the systems to deliver the product, was fascinating and very rewarding. Our experience to date suggests that our analysis was correct and that people like what we have produced.

SH: I hope from what I know of you and from what you have been saying that you will look back on your time at the BDA with justifiable satisfaction and great fondness, not least for the people you have worked with. But I also know you well enough to guess that there is plenty still on the agenda. So, what next?

PW: As you know I have dabbled with some creative writing and that is still something of a personal indulgence. From a more business-orientated perspective I remain very interested in dentistry and in professional organisations. So, I will still be around and will join in projects that interest me, be that at a strategic or policy level or indeed in a journalistic one. The main thing is that I will now have a bit more flexibility with my time and the option to enjoy my growing throng of grandchildren.

SH: Peter, thank you for taking the time to talk to me and, more than that, although I know it is being said in other places and forums too, thank you on behalf of the profession for all you have done in these past 14 years. I hope that we will continue to see you in the dental context and be treated further to your avuncular good humour and model of sincere caring. I wish you a happy and fulfilled retirement. ■

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