

EDITORIAL

Presidential address

Russ Ladwa
BDA President 2020/21

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Friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. As a general dental practitioner (GDP), I am truly privileged to be bestowed this, the highest honour that the BDA can grant, to make me its President, following such illustrious names and giants of dentistry.

I never anticipated it, nor did I expect it to come at such an unprecedented time.

I take office with this country and this profession facing a real crisis that is touching every colleague and every family in ways most of us have never seen in our lifetimes.

Clearly the coronavirus pandemic will inevitably loom large over my presidency. So, I am heartened the BDA has stepped up and shown real leadership when it hasn't always been forthcoming from the authorities.

We have set out to reduce, wherever we can, the impact being felt by every practice and every practitioner, to help keep dentists, their teams and their patients safe and this service sustainable. And whether it is delivering much needed advice or lobbying to meet the latest threat, that work goes on.

This challenge, huge as it is, will dominate, but not define my term of office.

Yes, we have a responsibility to meet this threat head on, but we cannot shirk the other challenges we face.

My predecessor, Roz McMullan, whose effervescent energy and dynamism I am not sure I will be able to match, put mental health and wellbeing at the forefront of our agenda. She has my heartfelt thanks. In these uncertain times, the foundations she has laid are needed more than ever and will be built upon.

And then there is the task ahead to help this Association look more like the profession it serves.

As an 'outsider', I am particularly proud to be made its 134th President. It has been a long and not easy journey to get here.

I have always believed in the mantra that any post should be won on merit alone, with equal opportunities afforded to all.

I am equally clear that every dentist requires strong role models to aspire to. They should be able to see themselves in the BDA, if they are to take part, to grow and even lead a strong membership organisation, such as ours.

So, the underrepresentation of women on the Principal Executive Committee (PEC) and across the BDA seriously concerns me just as much as the profession-wide underrepresentation of black, Asian and minority dentists.

Democracy sometimes has to be helped along. As half the profession and almost half of our membership, the case for women to be better represented is undeniable. I am glad that this is being currently addressed



'All eyes are on one public health challenge, but we will continue to lead on oral health.'

positively and I promise to do all I can, during my term, to support their cause.

The BDA also takes very seriously the matter of racial injustice and has earnestly started the process of seeking to play its part in tackling inequalities on grounds of race and colour; an issue close to my heart. There is a very deep and personal reason, as I know myself what it feels like to be ignored, marginalised or deemed incapable of any meaningful contribution.

I want to share my own story with others facing similar struggles. I got here through patience, persistence and perseverance. I am pleased to say that far more people helped me to get here than the few who obstructed me.

So, to anyone out there who has that burning fire in the belly for fairness and justice, I say, 'be strong, persist, do the right

thing and never give up!' There is no doubt in my mind that you can ultimately succeed, and the BDA will be your ally.

During this crisis another group that requires our urgent attention are our younger members.

Again, I declare a personal interest, as my younger daughter Radhika recently retrained as a dentist and my older daughter Meera is a junior hospital doctor. I kept abreast of their problems and challenges on a daily basis!

With dental schools limiting activities, I may not be able to visit the next generation as my predecessor did with such energy, at least for the time being. But I shall endeavour to do whatever I can to help and support this group of young professionals.

Even before coronavirus emerged, it was said we lived in times that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. This is exactly why we need strong anchors, safe harbours and solid lighthouses with very visible beacons.

We can start by reminding ourselves and reviewing our *raison d'être*. What did we put in that university application as to why we wanted to be dentists? Have we forgotten? Our daily professional lives take over, often fogging our primary purpose: that of being part of a caring profession.

It was heart-warming to see in recent polling on public trust of the professions, that we dentists are rated third (90% trusted) behind only nurses (95%) and doctors (93%).

Let us capitalise on that well-earned trust and find means to involve and mobilise our very faithful and loyal patients. The General

Dental Council appears to view us with a very different lens, but it should reflect on that confirmed level of public trust in fulfilling and sticking to its core remit. The profession has lost faith in the GDC, the regulator that we fund. I sincerely believe it cannot function adequately or optimally in such a state. It has made steps in the right direction but needs to understand us and work with us to regain our trust too. Perhaps, if it was led by a fellow dentist, it may be better able to fulfil its remit in the long term.

Meanwhile, as we live through such unparalleled events, we as a profession also need to reaffirm our values and put our pride and passion back into our professionalism. It remains a scandal, in this day and age and in an advanced country such as ours, that thousands of school children are having general anaesthetics to have extractions. Yes, all eyes are on one public health challenge, but we will continue to lead on oral health.

We must be open to work with all parties no matter what our differences, and I aim to put my post to good use to help build bridges with the Chief Dental Officers, the dental faculties of the Royal Colleges and whoever else necessary.

I am a GDP who has had some amazing opportunities during the course of my career, and the privilege to have been involved with several august bodies and institutions. However, my last seven years as a member of the BDA's

Board have been thoroughly illuminating and a great education about a multiplicity of complex professional issues. I can safely say, without any fear or favour, that I observed at close quarters some of the best brains in dentistry at work. Each unique and individual in their own right and, as one combined unit, even greater than the sum of its parts.

The same applies to the balanced and tempered leadership exhibited by Mick Armstrong when dealing with some of the trickiest issues facing the Association, in all that the BDA does unselfishly for the benefit of the whole of the dental profession. Similarly, I would also like to commend those unsung heroes: all the staff of the BDA led by Martin Woodrow who became CEO at such a critical time but has already made a mark. I have never seen such a strong and dedicated team elsewhere. I would like to congratulate and thank them for all they do for us.

Yes, COVID has changed the game.

Many colleagues now face an uncertain future. Oral health inequalities we've struggled with for so long look set to widen. Prevention looks less attainable than ever.

But a pandemic isn't the time to step away from these challenges. It's the moment to confront them head on.

The World Health Organisation recommends we must 'think globally but

act locally.' However, to lead, co-ordinate and consolidate that process, for it to have maximum success, we need a strong national voice.

Already this crisis is showing what a strong association can do. It is plain to see for our friends and colleagues who are not members, what strength in numbers can achieve.

I am saddened that my own parents who instilled in me the thirst for knowledge and the drive to be something or do something positive, did not live to see this day, nor did my older brother Jay who always inspired me. However, I am proud to have the loyal support of my lovely wife Taru and our two daughters.

So, let me thank this country for giving me a home, this profession for providing me such a satisfying career, the BDA for granting me its highest honour and you all, for your support and good wishes.

I pledge to be a listening President for all our members, regardless of their background, specialty, or discipline. In these trying times we are stronger together.

But I truly believe it is the sheer diversity of this profession which makes us a force to be reckoned with that will enable us to get through this crisis.

Thank you! ■

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Valedictory address

Roz McMullan
BDA President 2019/20

As I write this address, our profession, country and the world are facing one of the biggest peacetime medical challenges since the influenza pandemic in 1918. Only history and robust public health research will tell us which of the policies have had an impact on our ability to manage the rapid transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. My thoughts and prayers are with all of you who have suffered COVID-19 or lost loved ones to this awful disease.

Never has it been more important to be part of the British Dental Association (BDA) family, knowing it is dentists working for dentists and stepping up to speak out on our behalf. Over the last

months I have seen BDA staff, directors, representatives and our academic colleagues working long hours to give consistent evidence-based advice to all our



'The great profession of dentistry will undoubtedly be changed, but it will survive.'

UK members at a time of uncertainty, so we can protect our patients, staff, families and ourselves. On behalf of the whole

profession, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you.

Individually we take responsibility for our professional decisions and making

those decisions can be frightening and stressful. There can be a lot at stake. The BDA aims to help you make the right