

# Change

Shaun Sellars continues his series on ethical dilemmas in dentistry which appears in every second issue of the *BDJ*.

It's been a wild ride of a General Election, with Labour securing a historic landslide victory and a colossal majority. But what does this mean for dentistry in the UK, both in the NHS and the private sector? Here are some predictions and suggestions for the future – an open letter to Keir Starmer and Wes Streeting.

A fundamental overhaul of the NHS dental contract is necessary in the long term. The UDA system should be replaced with an agreement prioritising access, emergency care, and essential treatment. This revamped contract would allow many dentists to continue to serve NHS patients. Clarity on what the NHS covers and what requires additional private payment will boost the private sector, which is a win-win situation for dentists.

Getting to this point, though, requires short- and medium-term changes, which may take more work to achieve. In the immediate future, the government will need to shore up NHS dentistry to stem the current outflow of dentists. This is likely to be complicated and expensive

and will probably take the form of increased payments for improved access.

The government needs to urgently address the shortage of dentists, especially those willing to work in the NHS. This is a pressing issue that needs immediate attention. It also needs to look at improving working conditions within the profession, which notoriously suffers from high degrees of mental health issues and burnout. However, the real danger lies in needing a clear roadmap for the profession. Dentists will want a clear vision of what the profession will look like in the coming few years, and this is where the government's focus should be.

This means looking at the early stages of the dental career, from dental school to early years post-qualification. I'd expect some form of salaried NHS tie-in, with regulated working hours and structured postgraduate career development, to be brought in as a proviso for entry into dental school. This may not be popular with the dentists of today, but it would help ensure the dentists of tomorrow are, first and foremost, there to provide healthcare.



There's also likely to be a push towards a patient-centred approach, focusing on preventive healthcare, such as introducing supervised toothbrushing in schools. This is welcome, but why stop there? The government should aim to strengthen the connection between dentistry and overall health and care, particularly in nutrition and obesity reduction, primarily through social care reformation and increased taxation of foods high in fat, sugar and salt. Nanny statism be damned. The sugar tax helped reduce obesity; let's learn from that lesson.

These changes require a strong political will, as they may not be popular within the profession. However, they may be necessary for the health of the nation. They will also require funding, and as we are all aware, the government coffers aren't exactly overflowing. This is the central question mark for all these proposals. Where is the money coming from, and will we all have to pay?

# Progressing art and science



As described in the previous issue,<sup>1</sup> the cover series for Volume 237 is comprised of a set of new illustrations based on a retrospective look at the past 20 years. For this issue, the cover used as its inspiration is that from Volume 202 Issue 10 which was published on 26 May 2007.

This was created by Joe Dixon as part of a series based on interpretations of microorganisms encountered in the dental world. It followed from the series commissioned to celebrate Volume 200 of the *BDJ* in 2006, for which we invited submissions from 12 young artists encompassing the themes of dentistry/oral health and 200. Subsequent to this, we sought readers' votes as to their favourite of the dozen pieces, with a view to commissioning

a further whole series from the winning artist. Joe was that winner and the microorganism series was developed in collaboration with him. The originals were displayed, and were open for sale, at an event later in 2007 at the British Dental Association (BDA).

Our thinking at the time was to build on these early foundations of the coalescence of art and science in dentistry and in this new interpretation Tim has, as it were, zoomed out to illustrate the practical interaction of the microscope, the researcher and the clinical relevance.

## References

1. Hancocks S. Behind the new cover series. *Br Dent J* 2024; 237: 13.