

## EDITORIAL

# Youngsters and oldsters

Stephen Hancocks OBE  
Editor-in-Chief

The *BDJ* Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews. Please direct your correspondence to the News Editor, Kate Quinlan at [k.quinlan@nature.com](mailto:k.quinlan@nature.com). Press releases or articles may be edited, and should include a colour photograph if possible.

I've been opining in this column for some considerable time that dentistry will be changing and will need to change in the near future. I based this primarily on disease trends as noted in surveys; projections of which suggest the now familiar overall falling caries rates and the concomitant adjustments to traditional operative dentistry. I still feel that this is a major factor but I am also intrigued by emerging signs of changes in dentists themselves; notably younger dentists.

I always shy away from beginning a sentence with 'when I was a student' because I remember when I was a student taking metaphorical eyebrow-raising moments as a wrinkly old dentist said it to me. However, I am using the justification that it is in context and I am not about to criticise our younger colleagues, only to compare. When I was a student the A level grades needed for acceptance into dental school were, well, shall we say considerably more relaxed than they are now or have been for some years. Thus for myself and my contemporaries entry requirements were possibly as balanced on personality and character as they were on academic excellence. They may still be, but the emphasis on the latter is now far and away higher than it was then. At some point, probably in the 1990s, the demand for places exceeded the supply several-fold and dental schools decided to take what can only really be seen as a tick-box, line of least resistance, way out. Rather than using quality *per se* as a measure of desired candidates they opted to take quantity as their yardstick – how many marks gained in how many exams?

The result has been a cadre of qualified dentists who are unquestionably more academically endowed than their older colleagues. But the question is often asked as to whether they have the same people skills, common touch, chairside manner? The problem with all such judgments is that dentistry is a profession composed of

individuals who treat individuals which means that any attempt at generalisation is doomed to fail. I meet many young dentists in the course of my work and I have to say that I am hugely impressed by the majority of them. However, several elements are making me reassess how they might choose to practise for the rest of their working lives.

Only a handful of years ago I despaired that we would ever find young people interested in dental writing and editing. No one seemed the least bit bothered. More recently we have been all but beating them off with sticks. I'm delighted. To help with the demand we visit dental schools and student societies to present on 'how to get published' and run an annual, well attended, workshop



**'For myself and my contemporaries entry requirements were possibly as balanced on personality and character as they were on academic excellence.'**

for new writers. And do you know what? There is some seriously good talent out there; which we are delighted to include in these pages. The writers vary very much in their careers to date and their aspirations, but few of them express a desire to practise dentistry full time and forever. Intellectually, they seek other challenges either as supplements or exclusively. Many have terrifying collections of additional qualifications and achievements. For all these skills, of which I am often in awe, I cannot help but wonder if the four-walls of general dental practice or even secondary or tertiary care will contain them for long.

Which leads me on to the second observation, that of the so-called recruitment crisis. We have highlighted this here recently

too as the subject of a *BDJ Jobs* White Paper. Supported anecdotally too, the overriding sense is that 'the youngsters' as 'the oldsters' like to cheekily dub them, simply do not seem to want to work eight hours a day, five days a week, or more. Actually, very much less. They are not, it seems, driven only by earning money but by other factors which might be loosely categorised under work-life balance. Does this mean that their academic prowess dictates that they can see through, over, or above that at which a 'traditional' dentist has always toiled?

Taking evidence from yet another strand, I understand from the dental industry that practice owners and corporates are busy updating surgeries and purchasing new

equipment so as to be able to attract recent graduates to fill their associate vacancies. Meaning that patients and the profession are potentially gaining from improved standards and possibly, ultimately, from less stressed, better balanced dentists. What may have been lost in classical chairside manner may ultimately be gained by a greater holistic sense. It is a fine line and my speculation has a long way to run before I can test any type of hypothesis. It does occur to me though that as much as disease trends will the set future of dentistry it could yet be as strongly influenced and directed by the type of people who have more recently come to inhabit the profession. Of course, when I was a student... ■

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-019-1157-y>