

GPT and the profession

Ownership of GPT rests with the profession — the profession as a whole must now engage with the debate and take action

The cliché 'constant change is here to stay' came into being because it is true. Not that change was absent when some of us started out in dentistry — nowadays there just seems to be more of it, emanating from ever more quarters. Today's dental graduates, wherever they practise, face a complex dental scene with many career opportunities but often insufficient experience to make an informed choice. Flexibility in training and the equipping of graduates with the skills to manage change will aid their professional and personal development and help reinforce a commitment to lifelong learning. The result can only be a more effective workforce and better patient care.

A recent BDA survey found the majority of young dentists in both primary and secondary care thought some time in the other's environment would have been helpful. A survey of Scottish vocational dental practitioners also showed overwhelming support for a two-year period of practical training after graduation across the three main branches of the profession. It was against this background of rising demand for such experience that a broad range of interested bodies was brought together in 1996 to form a representative committee to consider the development of general professional training for dentists. Fourteen bodies nominated 26 members that met on eight occasions over three years, including a two-day workshop, and produced two reports for consultation. That committee, the General Professional Training (GPT) Committee, has now been wound up after achieving a remarkable consensus on many difficult issues.

The General Dental Council facilitated the work of the GPT Committee by providing the venue and secretariat, with the financial support of the Department of Health. The profession has been fortunate and well served in the membership of the Committee and in the skill and determination of its Chairman, Professor John Murray. That phase is now over and the messages and recommendations from the Committee now need to be disseminated and acted upon by the relevant bodies. Although the consultation exercise showed a general wish for a national body such as the GDC to co-ordinate general professional training, members of the Committee recognised that any further development should await the results of the several GPT pilot scheme evaluations throughout the UK. The GDC was unwilling to see the accumulated expertise fall fallow, but neither did it wish to assume the role of a national body, certainly not one with an operational management role. Therefore, until the evaluations can be reviewed, the GDC have proposed that the momentum be maintained by the holding of a six-monthly forum.

This forum would not be another GPT Committee. It would be more participatory in style, workshops hearing the results of pilot studies as they become available, with speakers contributing their own experiences of GPT in practice. In the meantime the GDC, together with others in the GPT Committee and elsewhere, should be considering the recommendations in the GPT Committee report and deciding what tasks can be actioned now and devising appropriate plans for the future.

Now I believe we all have a duty to look carefully at the opportunities offered by general professional training which would embrace and enhance vocational training and provide guidance to graduates on the next career steps to be taken. The central issue is better patient care from a workforce enhanced through broader training, wider experience and informed career choice. Ownership of GPT rests with the profession - the profession as a whole must now engage with the debate and take action.

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