

The Gender Challenge

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It will not have escaped the notice of most readers of the *British Dental Journal* that the study 'Better Opportunities for Women Dentists' is currently taking place. Starting in June, a letter requesting information on certain topics was sent to all major professional organisations, including the BDA. Subsequently, a series of focus groups, some including both men and women, were held around England to explore in more depth part-time working, flexible training, and careers advice to name just three issues covered.

The final part of the study comprises a questionnaire which was being sent on 8 November to all women in England who are on the dentists register as well as to the not inconsiderable number of women who do not maintain current registration. So why all the sudden interest in women dentists? Women now make up around 50 per cent of the annual intake to dental schools and will increasingly be major players in the future dental workforce. However, from current information it appears that women dentists work on average only two days each week in the General Dental Service. With the reported difficulty in getting associates, regular part-time or reduced working by women dentists could exacerbate the current workforce shortage.

Women do have different and sometimes competing priorities in relation to areas such as child care and maternity arrangements, which may influence future working patterns and career choices or aspirations. In the dental strategy 'Modernising NHS Dentistry — Implementing the NHS Plan', published in September, it was reassuring to read of the commitment to 'explore ways of providing supportive and family-friendly policies in NHS dentistry to help dentists have the working patterns they want.' This would seem to recognise that the problems of NHS dental practice affect male as well as female dentists and that while the current study is aimed at gathering information from women dentists, the results and recommendations should benefit the whole profession.

The increasing number of women in the dental workforce also has a European dimension. Dr Michele Aerden was appointed to lead a working group of the European Regional Organisation (ERO) in order to look at the impact of more women in the dental workforce and to propose solutions. To gather information, thirty ERO member associations, including the BDA, took part in two surveys in 1996 and 1999. The results confirmed the trend of females entering the profession, especially in the Eastern European countries where it has risen to 90 per cent. Another significant finding from the study was that while women join professional organisations, few play a role in the decision-making bodies.

Repeatedly there have been calls for more women to become actively involved in the BDA, LDC and GDC, to name but a few organisations. Just why women do not seek election or appointment to organisations or institutions may be clarified from the findings of the study. But this problem is not unique to our profession. The conclusion in the recently published European Commission's report on mainstreaming gender equality in service stated, 'The under-representation of women threatens the goals of science in achieving excellence as well as being wasteful and unjust.'

Could this be the opportunity for the dental profession to lead and demonstrate how to solve this universal problem? A gender challenge indeed!

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Women Dentists'

If any women dentist in England has not received the questionnaire or who would like clarification, Pam Murphy (tel: 020-7972-5508 or e-mail Pam.Murphy@doh.gsi.gov.uk) will be pleased to help.