

Is this the practical manifestation of the GDC's vision of a career escalator; allowing someone to start as a dental team member and progress to become a dentist?

Of bright college days or expedient solutions?

Dental schools; love them or hate them, remember them fondly or recall how the day you left was the best day of your life, attending them is undeniably an experience which we all have in common.

The news that a new dental school is to be opened in the South West (see News on page 127) is therefore a significant event for the profession, as is the creation of further dental training places spread across other parts of the country - at the Universities of Liverpool, Central Lancashire, Lancaster, St Martin's College for Cumbria and six places in Hull under the University of Leeds. In Devon and Cornwall, the new school, the Peninsular Dental School, will be based on multi-campus sites at the Universities of Exeter, Plymouth and Truro and the NHS within Devon and Cornwall.

Being on several sites already marks this new 62 place school as being slightly out of the ordinary, but that is not the only significant difference between it and the establishments of fond memory, or otherwise, of our undergraduate days. The bids for the new school were selected for their innovative approach to dental training, with most places being offered to students "who will receive the majority of their clinical teaching in the community". Additionally, the intakes will consist of students who "already hold a degree or who are mature students with a healthcare background".

This represents an extremely interesting added dimension to what is already a minefield of educational, political and economic debate, namely the impossible balance in trying to predict and achieve an equitable level of workforce. Given that in any event it will about the time of the London Olympics before the first multi-campus dental graduates emerge from their Peninsular alma mater, what effect will mature students start to have on the age profile of the profession? Similarly, what type of graduates will they be, having already got a healthcare background and having been clinically taught in the community? Is this the practical manifestation of the GDC's vision of a career escalator; allowing someone to start as a dental team member and progress to become a dentist?

Or is this a creature with a different agenda altogether? Reading deeper into the announcement we learn that Health Minister Rosie Winterton said "we have been doing much to retain and recruit more dentists to the NHS," and further, in relation to the areas receiving the new places, "although we have helped these areas with the recruitment of dentists from overseas, providing facilities for training dentists in these areas offers the best prospect of an enduring solution to these recruitment problems."

So, is this revelation of 100 new training places a genuine initiative to redress an apparent workforce problem in oral health care provision or is it a veiled attempt to 'recruit' a certain type of future dental worker into an NHS career? I pose the question partly out of cynicism, given the various promises of improved access to dental care and the current situation over the imposed contract (see News on page 132 for the latest dramatic developments on this) but also out of a genuine concern that we may be starting down a path which will ultimately create a very different sort of dental care professional, defined as much by economic necessity as by oral care considerations.

Those who know me will attest to the fact that I am a supporter of DCPs and the expanding and diversifying nature of the dental team as a vital way forward for the profession. But this enthusiasm is in relation to health care provision and is not in response to political expediency. If these new training opportunities are a genuine attempt to progress oral health in this country then they are to be welcomed as a response to the voices which have been calling for improved standards and greater equity of care. However, they warrant careful monitoring and review because, quite apart from issues of academic staffing and other currently scarce resources, if they represent a short term fix, then they will produce only a medium term confusion and a longer term slide into disillusionment.

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