

POTENTIAL ENERGY

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I remember being both intrigued and puzzled at school with the concept of potential energy. It was in physics I suppose, or perhaps maths, but the teacher lifted a box of chalk placing it on a shelf and explained that she had now invested it with potential energy. Frankly I didn't get it. How did this force of nature disguise itself? The box looked exactly the same as it did moments previously but merely in a higher place. Theory was made manifest though when at a later date we balanced the same container on top of a half open door and watched in agonising adolescent anticipation as the tumble of white sticks descended on the head of the school creep as he pushed open the door and gazed upwards in disbelief at the falling chalk rapidly innocently surrendering up its erstwhile potential energy. What larks.

However, to the point. That which is invested with potential energy does not necessarily look any different or behave with any apparent dramatic consequence until it is unleashed. Quite often the BDA is accused of such seeming inactivity. 'What has the BDA ever done for us?' goes up the cry and, rather like the famous comedy sketch from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, the answer that is given provides a long list of substantial things that in the case of the latter, the 'Romans' did and in the case of the former, the Association has achieved on behalf of members but also often on behalf of the profession in general.

The BDA, or indeed any member association, cannot act effectively without the potential energy of the combined numbers of individuals that make up what

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becomes its bargaining and negotiating power; the strength of the collective. This has always been the way but the attitude with which such associations have become regarded in recent times has changed, as has so much else in society. Whereas in previous times joining a professional group was regarded as an essential, an automatic action which one did without question, nowadays the attitude towards belonging is quite different. Only if there are perceived and immediate benefits will people join and remain members of an association.

Our real income has seen a steady erosion in recent years due to a variety of factors, the global financial crash included, making us more discerning in our spending patterns. But so too have other transactions, with new approaches to learning, buying and access. In response to these shifting trends, the BDA membership offering changed too in 2013, becoming a three-tiered system providing a choice of service level and subscription based on anticipated usage and need. This has proved popular and is widely regarded as a fairer way of the Association serving its members. Numbers have stayed broadly the same although the demographics have shifted with a far greater number of dental students joining than ever before, to the extent that over 80% of final year UK undergraduates are now BDA members. What is it that they can see which other, older colleagues can apparently not? Is the wheel turning one of its famous full circles? Is an ethos of collective responsibility returning?

Whatever the reasons, and they are likely to be multi-layered in such a complex modern world, the essential truth is that united we can stand whereas divided we are much less likely to be able to have our voice heard or achieve our professional goals. And make no mistake the threats to our profession, to many if not all professions, are real and present. We are struggling to live with a regulator that has spectacularly failed to the extent that it has been balled out in the Houses of Parliament. We are pressed by the longest advent of a new NHS contract which is now described as contract change rather as regime change has become current euphemistic parlance for replacing unpopular governments or states. Perhaps there is pertinence here too.

Throughout all this the BDA remains, as it seems to have done for much of its (long) history, something of a survivor, weathering the various storms of criticism of its alleged inactivity or sneers at its apparent ineffectual activity. Yet, it has survived and, perhaps surprisingly to many, it prospers and does deliver a whole range of benefits; one of which you are reading currently in the form of its internationally acclaimed publications. How do we explain this in a world so profoundly diverse and clearly at odds with previous values and attitudes? I suspect it is because, just as with the box of chalk in my classroom those decades ago, it is invested with a potential energy which one cannot see or feel until such time as the force which imbued it requires it to be released. From time to time the membership itself decides that. But the collective of individuals has first to have decided to be members and that, dear reader, is where the real potential lays.

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