

THE HISTORY OF EVERYTHING, DENTAL

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The BDJ Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews.

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From an early undergraduate age we are taught by rote that we must take dental histories. Quite exciting when we first start out, a sort of Agatha Christie journey through our patients' pasts. At about the same time in our professional development we also meet dental materials and 'dental history' as in the history of dentistry. Be honest, is it hard to say which strikes us as the most tedious?

I think, although I may be wrong, that the balance of that tedium changes as we, how shall I express it? as we mature. There is a tendency to become more interested in history as we also grow into our own histories and I think there is an underestimated value in that. This is especially true in our age of technological speed. Instancy reigns supreme. Email, tweets, news feeds, we can know what has happened anywhere in the world sooner than what is taking place in the next room. Immediacy has replaced contemplation as the currency and reflection has a very low exchange rate.

The *BDJ* is sometimes described as boring. Maybe. It depends on what bores you. Sometimes I get adverse criticism about the 'history' bits. 'What relevance have they?' I am asked. If you've read this far you will not be surprised that my answer is that I think an understanding of where we have come from, what shapes us and what defines us is key to our being able to make sense of the world around us contemporaneously. It is not something that consumes our every waking minute but it is a factor in making us who we are, how we practice and, more importantly, where we might be going.

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I have been prompted into thinking about this by a confluence of factors. Firstly, as you will read in this issue, we publish summaries of 'witness seminars'. In essence these are recorded conversations which have been carefully structured and curated (dreary sounding words but essential to help bring out the best) and capture what people, ordinary folk like you and me, witnessed in dentistry at various points in our careers and in the development of our profession. It is quite likely that you are already thinking that you haven't been a party to anything much that has shaped dentistry. But that is precisely where you are wrong. You have. Depending on age, you will have lived through contract changes, the recent GDC debacles, withdrawal of general anaesthetics from general dental practice (surely we never did GAs in general dental practice? – you see, some have forgotten, some never knew).

All these changes come and go, are yesterday's news or today's routine but have an extraordinary value which needs recording.

For me the joy of reading these summaries, and indeed the books of transcripts from which they are taken, comes through stumbling across small nuggets of unknown or forgotten information.

There was a time when we didn't wear gloves; the contracts of the 1990s and the clawbacks mirrored the same government reaction to that at the inception of dentistry in the NHS, a treasure chest of gems from which each of us will take different pleasures and wonderments.

I mentioned that there were several factors which had prompted this piece. Another was the recent retirement of Professor Stanley Gelbier as Curator of the BDA Museum after an astonishing 33 years. Concomitantly the recent appointment of Dr Margaret Wilson, whom we welcome as the new curator. Stanley is also a co-author and collaborator of the witness seminars and has been an ideal person to help direct them and inform their creation into a living archive.

If it still all sounds a bit high and mighty this is where the world of confluence plays its part. At a recent meeting I was approached by a dentist who wanted to ask me about the journal but who in the course of conversation divulged that she is the third generation of dentists in the family practice (in the true sense of the description). It wasn't until I was on the way home that it occurred to me that here was a perfect example of where a local witness seminar – oh, ok, not so grand perhaps, an evening or two spent recollecting how the practice 'was', around a tape recorder – could take place. Not so difficult to organise is it? And the wealth of knowledge, experience and history that would flow from such an exercise would be immense. Everyone present would learn something and everyone who listened subsequently would benefit in ways that it is impossible to conceive.

Furthermore, it would not need to be restricted to practices with a long history. Most practices grow from others or germinate from one dentist's ambition or two dentists' visions. These are all stories, all valuable markers of how dentistry today is what it is. Have a go. Let me know what happens; in dentistry. the history of everything; in dentistry.

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