

The last romance

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Perhaps the last romance left to us in dentistry is forensics. But why does something so morbid fascinate us so much?

As anyone who has ever been in the unenviable position of having to put on a series of lectures or meetings will tell you, there are a handful of sure-fire, dead certs with which to fill your meeting room. Firstly anything to do with money. Title it how you will, from the professionally sophisticated ring of something like 'Profitability and market share in an oral health care environment,' to the more modest 'How to make the most of your practice earning potential,' through to the immediacy of a tabloid appeal such as 'Dental dosh and how to get it,' and the people will tumble through the doors in anticipation of a lecture stuffed full of essential new information.

But there is one other subject which, perhaps surprisingly, has little directly to do with cash, at least in the practice sense, but which will also draw a dauntingly large crowd — forensic dentistry. Or, to give it its newer and distinctly superior title, Forensic Odontology.

Just what is it that makes us all so fascinated with the ghoulish side of life in general and dentistry in particular? The curiosity about bite marks in necks, or other less publicly exposed body parts, must be akin to the sordid inquisitiveness of children cheering fights in the playground, picking scabs and insistently poking dead animals with sticks despite repeated adult remonstrations.

It is the same insuppressible urge that makes us slow down to better observe the scene of a lorry spill or a car crash. The same inherent, macabre imperative that would have each and every one of us down at the site of a public execution, despite overwhelming protestations to the contrary that we would never attend such an awful event.

But, perhaps more charitably, the subject appeals most closely to that mysterious inner part of us that similarly loves to unravel the clues to murder mysteries. We are all occupied by the ghosts of Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot who lurk within us, knitting needles and silver-topped cane at the ready, in the hope of

discovering the essential missing piece of evidence that brings the villain to justice.

The irony is that the circumstances of forensic anything, odontology included, are about as far removed from the cosy sitting rooms of pre-war middle England as it is possible to get. Take those intriguing bite-marks for instance. While you are working out whether the pointy bit at the extreme left hand end of the wound could have been caused by a canine before or after it had been disto-palatally inclined with an edgewise appliance, the poor

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owner of that particular bit of flesh is either nursing it back to health or is quietly contemplating it six feet under. Very rarely, it seems, does the opportunity arise to identify a miscreant from incisor markings in a nice piece of Wensleydale or a conveniently retrieved slice of half-eaten strawberry jam-filled Victoria sponge. But then again that would not be nearly as titillatingly voyeuristic as the obviously passionate chunk removed from a shoulder, groin or inner thigh, especially when accompanied by the lecturer's laser pointer indicating the tell-tale areas of bruising where extra suction has taken place.

Mass disasters of various descriptions are the real nub of the subject though. Burnt, crushed and mangled bodies giving up their secrets by way of partial upper dentures with the name 'Gladys' scratched on. It seems fittingly sad that the sum total of one's lifelong efforts day in, day out, to be something special end by being identified as having a singularly unique pattern

of three overhanging, interproximal amalgams and an inadequate root filling.

The subject is also hung about with other deliciously idiosyncratic niceties. Case histories are embellished by the use of words otherwise mysteriously under-used in everyday life. Words like, lacerations, contusions and petechiae. The photographs are very distinctive too. Broken fragments of jaws and strange looking remnants of anatomy out of their usual context are always conveniently accompanied by little bits of ruler. It must be the case that staff in forensic departments either spend half their waking hours snapping measuring sticks into bits or that there is a supplier somewhere who sells such portions in a convenient variety of sizes manufactured to anticipate the dimensions of various gruesome exhibits.

The items, human or otherwise, are also invariably displayed against an aesthetically pleasingly blue or green background fabric of clearly the highest quality weave. Never, you will notice, an old dishcloth or the hastily ripped-off bit of a handily available breakfast cereal packet. Oh no, this is professional stuff indeed. The 'glamour' of the discipline has also been added to immeasurably by the on-screen portrayal of forensic specialists. Soft-focus actresses stoop meaningfully over bodies in the glorious countryside of the Yorkshire Dales or street-wise, if quirkily successful, loveable eccentrics operate in colourfully depicted inner-city squalor.

So, what would it take to break the pretence of the romance, make us realise that the whole messy business doesn't quite take place in the comfy familiarity of our own surgeries and practices? A stronger appreciation of the smells involved might be a start or perhaps a request accompanying your air tickets to bring your latest bite-wings with you and leave them at check-in against an unexpected incident. No, it'll never happen will it? An empty lecture theatre on forensics night!

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