Hidden agendas?

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Discrimination is one of those things that often seems less important until it happens to you — and then it becomes very important indeed. As those who have been discriminated against will verify, it leaves you with feelings of rage, anger, disappointment and sadness that people can actually think like that.

I was reminded of this recently when the *BDJ* editorial offices received some telephone calls relating to an advertisement in the Classified section. The advertisement was within the letter of the law, but the perception of the callers was that the heading of the advertisement was discriminatory because of what it inferred rather than what it actually said.

This set me thinking, and I began to look at some of the *BDJ* advertisements in more detail. After all, the Publisher's Statement that we publish in every issue states quite clearly that we will not accept advertisements that I consider discriminatory on the grounds of sex, colour, race, religion, nationality, sex orientation or ethnic origin. These are fine words, but was I being careful enough in actually implementing them? And, as an additional concern, where should we draw the line between what the words actually say and what is inferred?

Before examining some of my findings, it is important to clarify one point that can annoy a number of readers — advertisements for jobs in countries that do not fall within our legislation. For these advertisements there is less restriction so that the advertisers can basically state requirements that would be classed as illegal were the advert for a job in the UK. Such is life!

Following the telephone calls I began to examine some of the classified advertisements in recent *BDJs*. The first that caught my eye stated that a position was vacant in a dental practice because a *lady dentist* (my italics) had left. My heightened suspicious attitude immediately wanted to know the relevance for mentioning that the previous dentist had been female. Was the advertiser implying that only women would be acceptable for the post (sex discrimination and illegal) or was there a more sinister reason. The important question was — why was the gender of the previous associate mentioned.

The next I saw (on the same page) stated that someone was wanted to join '*our young team*' (my italics). Was this some form of age discrimination? While it may not yet be illegal to state the age preferred, good practice suggests that age discrimination is both unnecessary and distasteful. Surely what matters is the ability of the individual to do the job — and nothing else. This is the basis behind much of the current legislation to try and prevent discrimination on (usually invalid) grounds to avoid certain people applying.

The third advertisement I saw (again on the same page) quoted the religion of either the owner of the practice or the applicant (this was not made clear) within the advertisement without clarifying the reason why the religion was mentioned. Was this also some form of subtle hidden agenda, either asking for people of a certain religion only or inferring that people with the beliefs and the ethics of a certain religion were somehow 'better' than the rest of us? Or was it more likely to be a form of racial or ethnic discrimination?

Of course it is possible to go to extremes in this, and I believe I resisted that temptation. Discrimination is an unpleasant and dangerous prejudice that we should be able to control, and the *BDJ* will be taking steps to raise our awareness of the possibility even more in future classified adverts. With approximately one quarter of our advertisements arriving within two hours of the deadline it is possible one may slip through in the future, and if that happens I apologise to all those who are discriminated against. Please tell me when it happens so we can continue to reduce this distasteful practice.

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