A job for life?

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It is not unusual for people to ask themselves the question “Is this really what I want to do for the rest of my working life?” at times, and dentists are the same as everyone else. Today the traditional approach of “a job of life” has gone from most areas of work, and the professions are no different. In fact, many believe that a mid-life change benefits both the individual and the organisations that employ people.

In dentistry, especially in general practice, there seems to be a psychological wall of minor dissatisfaction ten years or so after graduating. ‘Is there something else I could be doing?’ is the question that arises after a particularly difficult day at the practice or a new pronouncement from the Department of Health or the General Dental Council. The future seems to stretch away into the distance with no hint of change or challenge.

Some GDPs find new avenues of professional fulfilment — perhaps by becoming a VT trainer, specialising or some sessional teaching. Others opt for a more dramatic route — maybe leaving the Armed Forces to go into general practice or giving up general practice for a new challenge in academic or community dentistry. But these are the exception, and many often feel ‘trapped’ in their current chosen field because the barriers to changing direction can seem almost insurmountable, not least the financial disincentive.

If we put financial concerns aside, the two most common reasons for dentists finding a change in career difficult are a lack of knowledge about what is involved (and what is available), and a lack of support. To start to provide help with both these questions the Eastman Dental Institute and the BDA recently held a ‘careers day’ in London providing advice and help. Perhaps unsurprisingly the seminar was overwhelmed, resulting in a change of venue to accommodate the increased numbers. Over 400 delegates attended, and although many were from VT schemes eager to look at all of the options available for their careers, there were also a good number of more mature dentists.

At the BDA we receive an ever-increasing number of calls from dentists looking for help in finding a new direction in dentistry. An increasing minority, moreover, have become more fundamentally disillusioned, some considering giving up dentistry altogether. This seems a shame at a time when the breadth of career options open to all dentists is widening. Besides the possibility of alternative careers in hospital or community dentistry or the prospect of service with the Armed Forces, there are growing opportunities with Corporate Bodies and new options in the forms of practice in Personal Dental Services and Access Centres.

The BDA has taken the lead for a few years now in providing a (limited) careers service to school students and their parents. Many members of the profession have found real enjoyment in going along to careers evenings and school sixth forms and meeting young, enthusiastic potential dentists. We have also, increasingly, offered a limited careers advice service to undergraduates, among whom the ‘Which Way Now?’ advice sheet is exceptionally popular, and VT schemes who visit the BDA often opt for a speaker on ‘career development’ as a topic they would like us to cover. The area that has been neglected for so long is help and support for the older dentist who cannot see any excitement left in his or her dental career. This is an important topic, and one the BDA will continue to develop, with appropriate partners, into the future.

Martin Cock
Recruitment and Marketing Manager,
British Dental Association
m.cock@bda-dentistry.org.uk

For further information and help contact the BDA on 020 7563 4178