The Evangelical Wing?

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The move from NHS general dental practice into the 'bright and shiny' world of the private sector seems to have a very odd effect on some people, somewhat akin to the 'evangelical' conversion that occurs on discovering a new belief system or new way of doing things. In effect, having been converted to this new way of life, the individual seems to have an overwhelming desire to 'convert' everyone else to their own way of thinking.

So what are the apparent benefits for those dentists who have moved to fully private practice that cause this missionary zeal? They can plan treatment and arrange payment for it without any interference from a third party funder. Their more flexible practice arrangements create a relaxed atmosphere in which higher levels of quality treatment could and should be easier to achieve. The greater cash flow and higher profit levels that private practices (supposedly) generate make forward planning and investment in their practices much easier than for their colleagues in the NHS GDS and Community Dental Service. While it has never been suggested that the world of private dentistry represents the 'Elysian Fields of dentistry' without any work, stress or problems, the very real improvements in the life style of those who have made the move are there for all to see.

Despite the significant changes that are taking place around them, many other practitioners — for reasons best known to themselves - prefer to remain committed to the GDS, the CDS and the PDS. For some this may be a matter of choice based on personal ideology, for others there may be no choice for sound financial reasons. This group of NHS practitioners represents a large part of the membership of the BDA — they cannot, should not and will not be ignored. The work of trying to improve the terms and conditions for all our members who work in the NHS will carry on. This requirement was clearly spelled out to the Association in a recent members' survey (January 2000) when 82% of members said it was essential that the BDA fight for a better deal for all those dentists who work in the NHS.

For some reason, this situation seems to present itself as an affront to the evangelical wing of the private dentistry movement. They appear to believe that NHS dentistry is in some way 'bad' and therefore must be decried and diminished at every opportunity. Thus, when any new idea for the NHS comes along the evangelical wing goes into full war cry.

Forgive me for asking the 'daft laddie question' but why are they so hypersensitive about a system they claim to no longer work in? Maybe theirs is a genuine altruistic concern for their beleaguered NHS colleagues or maybe it is a sense of misplaced zeal for private conversion left over from their own experiences on the Road to Damascus. Either way, might I suggest that dentists are intelligent adults who make life choices of their own? If they choose to carry on working in the NHS — whatever their reasons may be, the BDA will continue to support them. That support will go on until our members tell us to stop bothering.

The dental profession has always contained many individuals whose views have struck a discordant note with the establishment. Some of them turned out to be genuine innovative thinkers whose vision and ability to 'think outside the box' was way ahead of their time. Others turned out to be crackpots. Such is life. The recurrent theme in many contributions from the evangelical wing of the private sector is that they are the only ones who are right and it is the rest who are out of step — my way or no way!

Are the evangelists right? I don't know, but the demands of democracy are such that vociferous minorities do not get their own way very often. History will tell us if they were right all along or whether they were merely singing from a unique hymn sheet that nobody else could read.

John Renshaw,
Chairman, Executive Board