

Facts and myths

Only 21% of people trust estate agents, and, a sobering thought for dental editors, only 14% trust journalists

The BDA's Press and Parliamentary Department (PPD) regularly produces a number of 'media fact sheets' to provide evidence for journalists and MPs on dental topics where previously information was mainly anecdotal. These fact sheets are also used to help promote positive news about dentistry, something we should all be grateful for. But, besides these important functions, they have some interesting messages within them for everyone involved in dentistry. For example, the most recent, titled *BDA: Dentistry Facts* contains information which should make us question a few of the myths that have been accepted for too long now.

The first myth is that only 50% of the UK population visit the dentist. This myth has been around for a long time, but the data from the Adult Dental Health Survey tells us that 50% of the population have a regular check-up (although there is some confusion over what 'regular' really means), 36% attend only when in pain and 14% go occasionally. My mathematics tells me that 50%+36%+14% adds up to 100%, which does make the so-called 'missing' 50% concept appear mistaken. What we are seeing is that 100% attend, but at differing times and with differing regularity. This phenomenon is known as choice, where different people exercise their right to choose their attendance pattern depending on advice from their dentist, their priorities and circumstances. This happens in every other situation where choice is an option and should not really come as a surprise to us.

The second myth (which seems to be fabricated at regular intervals by the media for their own purposes, rather than reported because it is true) is the so-called 'phantom patient' (usually a reporter in disguise) visiting a large number of dental practices to collect varying treatment plans and thus 'expose' the inconsistency between professionals. Ignoring the fact that this inconsistency is to be expected, what is so satisfying is that the Harris polls commissioned by the BDA show that eight out of ten people trust their dentist and nine out of ten have confidence in the treatment they receive. Even more satisfying is the fact that more people respect dentists now than 10 to 15 years ago. The figures are: 79% of people trust and respect dentists, seven out of ten people have no problem with going to the dentist and nearly 80% of parents say their children have no problems with going to the dentist either. This needs to be seen in the context that only 21% of people trust estate agents, and, a sobering thought for dental editors, only 14% trust journalists. It would seem that the majority of patients prefer to believe and trust their dentist far more than they believe the articles and consumer programmes purporting to 'protect' them from the profession. We can not only take heart from the results of these polls, but can use them to continue to gain even more confidence and trust for the future.

The final myth is the usual one I hear from dentists themselves; a concern that most patients would think that dentistry is too expensive — whatever remuneration system is chosen. The good news we can conclude from the media fact sheet is that 64% of patients (both NHS and private) stated that they were satisfied with the cost of their treatment and only 18% said that the cost of their dental treatment was more expensive than they expected. We should take these statistics to heart and begin to believe that people really do value their dental care. Besides believing that our patients value their dental treatment, we can be further encouraged by the fact that by continuing to provide a better service (not just clinically, but in all aspects of a dental visit) we can be confident that people will genuinely feel they are getting value for money, and be prepared to pay for it. Now that is a leap in faith.

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