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Are we older and wiser?

It seems a truism that increasing years may bring increased wisdom, but it also often results in a decreased awareness of what life is like for the young. This can result in tensions between the establishment (who tend by definition to be older and hopefully wiser) and the young (who feel they are misunderstood and therefore unappreciated). This situation is often quoted as a criticism of organisations such as the BDA where the establishment (the Representative Body and Executive Board) consists of individuals who are usually over 40 years of age and thus supposedly find it more difficult to relate to the concerns and feelings of the younger members.

To try and identify whether this concern (that the younger dentists are not represented or understood in the BDA establishment) the BDA carries out surveys of more recently qualified members. The latest has just been published and was reported in the recent issue of *BDA News* (and on pg 67 of this issue). This Young Dentists Survey was a follow up to the previous one carried out in 1998, and we hope to publish a scientific report on this in a future *BDJ*. The results reflect fairly accurately the feelings and concerns of young dentists (under 35 years of age) as the response was a healthy 61% out of 600 BDA members. Thus, this survey informs us of what matters to younger dentists, and some of the findings are worth considering.

The most optimistic result is that 89% were happy with their choice of career, which is good news but I suspect hardly surprising at that age. I well remember my own enthusiasm for my dental future in my late twenties, when everything looked rosy and bright, and it is gratifying to see this has not changed despite the substantial changes occurring in the profession at the moment. Sadly age tends to bring a degree of cynicism (some would say reality) to your perception of life, and perhaps we need more of that innocent attitude that the young display to balance the traditional cynicism of the more experienced.

That innocent optimism also spills into another finding. Apparently 92% of the respondents were confident in the economic future of private dentistry,

but not in the future of the NHS. I find this surprising because it suggests that many young dentists do not appreciate the commercial security of the NHS at the moment, especially for the GDS. Where else could someone set up a business with all the independence and freedom that entails, yet with a virtually guaranteed market and guaranteed payment system? In today's commercial world this arrangement is extremely beneficial for the owner of a business, as many people in business who survive in the 'real' world will tell you.

However, this result from the survey expressing confidence in private dentistry should perhaps be linked with another finding - that 57% seem happy to work as a salaried employee. It would appear that young dentists think that selling private dentistry will provide them with a guaranteed income in the future compared with providing NHS dentistry, but as employees they may assume (or hope) that someone else will find all the patients who want to buy private dentistry. This view is strengthened by the fact that the 53% stated that the opportunity to concentrate on dentistry rather than administration (by this I assume they mean business) was very important.

I suspect I am showing my age a little more these days, but I am not convinced that private dentistry is the panacea it is sometimes held out to be. Most dentists qualify with a total lack of awareness of how to market themselves and their services to potential patients, an increasingly important aspect of running a private practice. It is not enough simply to be good at providing quality dentistry.

I believe that increasing consumerism and competition will make selling dentistry more and more difficult, especially if more and more dentists are doing it, and I also believe will continue to do so in the future. The idea that dentists can rely on someone else (their employer, whether a practice owner or corporate body) to provide them with a continuous supply of people happy to pay privately for dentistry seems a tad naïve. Would that life was that easy.

Mike Grace
m.grace.bdj@bda-dentistry.org.uk