Dribble's in...

S. Hancocks, OBE*

Love it or hate it saliva is the ever present, or ever absent, fluid in our professional lives and beyond.

Most of the time we don't consciously think about it. It's just there. Yet when you take a moment out of the busy day's schedule of rearranging saliva ejectors and cotton wool rolls, fighting to keep cavities isolated, materials dry and cross-infection controlled you realise the extent to which your waking life is arranged around the naturally occurring and infuriatingly inconvenient properties of spittle.

How much easier dentistry would be if there were some way of controlling it, at least for the time that patients are in the chair. Something of a pipedream of course, rather like yearning for a world in which we no longer need to lock doors, eat sensibly or sleep if we don't want to.

Remember as students how you first struggled to get to grips with the slippery stuff? Those early days of trying to avoid smearing it over every other surface of the unit, patients' notes, nurses' apparel and your own itchy ear. Plus the oh-so-clichéd chant of the demonstrators who repeatedly reminded you of the consequences if saliva was red in colour. Although I have to say in their defence that there is a similar analogy when you cut open one of those vacuum sealed packages of beetroot over a white sink. Try this yourself at home to see what I mean, but only, I stress, under supervision of an adult fully trained in the art of domestic bleaching. And don't wear a clean shirt or blouse.

Equally sobering is the realisation of how the seepy fluid has insinuated itself not only into our professional considerations but also into folklore and indeed the English language. Ironical really that while the rest of the world talks about giving something a quick clean up by using the term 'spit and polish'; in our parlance the equivalent 'scale and polish' requires the specific exclusion of that same spit. Strange too that the usually, presumably, complimentary saying that a person bears an exact likeness or resemblance to someone else is that they are a 'dead spit'. Hardly the sort of expression that conjures up a pleasant picture. But then

again, better perhaps than invoking other bodily functions.

Curious too in a world so obsessed with cross infection control, is the age old superstition of spitting on one's hand or on money before shaking on a deal. Apparently a Roman and Greek habit as protection against enchantment, it is difficult to think of a less lovely way of showing one's respect for the person with whom business has just been agreed. I suppose though that in those ancient times, mention of hepatitis would probably have been thought of, if at all, as the name of a mystic far away kingdom to which Jason and his Argonauts would have sailed in search of plundering something or another. And who would really have cared as long as there was a big party to celebrate them getting back with some booty?

Hepatitis would probably have been thought of as the name of a mystic far away kingdom to which Jason and his Argonauts would have sailed...

Not that it is always an abundance that causes us problems. The seemingly increasing number of poor souls who suffer from dry mouth also present difficulties, especially when the mouth mirror glues itself uncomfortably to the cheek mucosa or a gauze square, temporarily positioned for treatment, looks set to become a permanently stuck-on feature, until at least the next mug of steamy Earl Grey. It also no doubt explains the more common sight nowadays of senior citizen coach parties smiling happily from stately-home-bound tours, waving with one hand with a bottle of water feverishly clutched in the other. Who would have thought to have hit upon such a fascinating social trend in the wake of the epidemiology of xerostomia? And they say this column isn't educational.

So, it seems you can't live with it and you can't live without it. Despite this, good

old dribble has obviously been to the public relations people for an entire image makeover, as in today's world rankings of useful bodily fluids it has an increasingly raised profile. While it might seem odd to some of us, there are people who devote their lives to studying every conceivable aspect of its characteristics: flow rate, composition, viscosity and an endless list of other features that might never occur to ordinary mortals. Imagine the breakfast time scene in a researcher's household: 'Bye darling, just off to spend the day in saliva.' Well it wouldn't suit us all, but wonderful that someone is so dedicated since the erstwhile humble oozing has indeed been discovered to contain all manner of clues to each of our current states of health, not to mention providing an individual fingerprint of our DNA make-up. Indeed, there is

every reason to suspect that its future is bright as a 'must have' health accessory.

It may well be that the existence of dentistry itself hinges on such considerations. With caries on the wane and the prevention of periodontal diseases sure to be tackled more effectively in future, what other role might be left for us except as interpreters of saliva? In the same way that palmists, crystal ball gazers and tea-leaf readers pick over their respective runes, maybe we too will gas-chromatography our patients' secretions to give predictions of future health, wealth and happiness. If that seems hard to swallow, just be thankful you can, because without dribble...

**Stephen Hancocks is Commissioning Editor of the BDJ*