

*We speak to patients every working day, so we need to tell them how trustworthy the profession is and how not everything they might have heard and read in the past was necessarily the truth.*

## Can you trust your journalist?

It's good to know that some things are getting better. Or at least that one senses that they are getting better. Despite the appearance to the contrary in the Channel 5 investigative programme *Can you trust your dentist?* screened late last year, the media's view of dentists and dentistry has unquestionably changed in recent years and to some extent in recent months.

There was a time, and indeed an infamous television programme many years ago was the main perpetrator of a trend, that any time there was an item or feature about dentists then the obligatory background music was Abba's 'Money, money, money, it's a rich man's world'. However, as the public's perception of the real situation over the state of NHS dentistry changed towards a greater understanding that the 'treadmill' system was not perhaps the best one to deliver modern oral care, so too did the media's. After all, we have to remember that the media's job is to sell. Whether it is newspapers or radio and television programmes that fill the sensational bits in-between adverts for dog food, new kitchens and soap powder, the need is to catch the public's imagination and sometimes that also requires aligning themselves with the public's sympathy, or at least sentiment.

So it was that the popular description swung from us being 'greedy dentists' to dentists who, quite understandably 'could no longer afford' to provide treatment for all under the NHS. But it was not due to a sudden alteration in the wind direction, it was brought about by the dental profession itself and by those working away behind the scenes on the profession's behalf, who gradually got the message over and began changing those perceptions. It has been a result of many of us not being prepared any longer to smile knowingly and respond with a sigh of resignation when the usual clichés about dentists are dragged out for another airing. Instead we have spoken up. 'I realise that you think that's a rather clever thing to trot out but it isn't true because...'

If you haven't tried it, be bold and give it a go. You will be pleasantly surprised that instead of people sniggering behind their hands they will take notice. There are times when being assertive can pay dividends and it is something we can all do. We speak to patients

(hopefully) every working day, so we need to tell them how good UK dentistry is, how trustworthy the profession is and how not everything they might have heard and read in the past was necessarily the truth.

It is an odd conundrum that we seem to trust a journalist, or at least that which a journalist writes or speaks, far more readily than we trust a figure of authority. Yet how many of us, when we have dealings with the local press, for example, can put our hands on our hearts and say that the reporting was one hundred per cent accurate? I would bet that at least one of the central facts was incorrect. Your age, the number of surgeries in the practice, the date you qualified. However, when we read the story we auto-correct it. Everyone who comes to the practice knows that there are three surgeries not two, so we assume that they'll ignore that 'fact'. Unfortunately all the readers who don't know the practice will assume it is true, in the same way that we all assume that *everything* in all the other articles is completely true and not subject to the same unfortunate lapses that have occurred in the story pertaining to us.

By the laws of probability, many of us treat journalists. In the same way we talk to patients (and friends, neighbours and people at airports) we need to talk to journalists too, put them straight, knock some of those old myths out of them. Pleasantly of course. There should be no bully-boy tactics but a calm explanation of why a television programme purporting to be a documentary should not be inter-cutting film footage of a road drill with an air rotor. No one is impressed by that anymore. *Can you trust your dentist?* opened with the words, 'what could be worse than a visit to the dentist?' The plain truth is that many, many people in 2005 can give you a whole list of things that they think are worse because they quite like going to their dentist. What instead, we might ask, could be worse than a visit from a biased journalist?

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