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Presidential address

Dr John Craig was installed as the new President of the British Dental Association at this year's 2005 National Annual Conference held in Glasgow on May 19–21 2005. The following is his presidential address.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming here this morning. It must have been an early start for most of you and it is a great pleasure to see so many friends here today.

I could not be more delighted with the great honour which the Association has done me by electing me president and I will say more on that in due course. Needless to say, perhaps, but it certainly didn't appear on the game plan when I enrolled in the BDA as a student member in the early sixties.

A pleasant and early duty of the new president is to acknowledge the contribution of his predecessor. Anyone who knows Tony Kravitz was well aware that he would perform his presidential duties with enormous diligence and attention to detail and, of course, he has done exactly that. He and Hilary have been untiring ambassadors for the Association and for the profession and, on a personal level, Tony's advice to me as the president elect has been characteristically generous and very helpful.

On behalf of the Association may I therefore congratulate and thank you both on a splendid presidential year and offer our best wishes to you and your family for the future.

I am sure you will agree that there are few



honours which are gained on the merits and work of the recipient alone and I am no exception to that. No one can attain the presidency without considerable support from many people, colleagues, friends and family. In my case my section, the Stirling & Clackmannan section, and my branch, the West of Scotland branch, have been generous in their support over many years and the other two Scottish branches, North of Scotland and East of Scotland have most kindly sponsored this conference. My colleagues in committees all the way from section to Executive Board have been equally generous in their support and to them I would add the BDA staff whose helpful and

constructive advice I have valued greatly over the years. You will understand when I make special mention of the members of the various Scottish Committees and both former and present staff of BDA Scotland. You are all too numerous to mention by name but you all know who you are and my grateful thanks go to you all.

I have obviously omitted two important groups, my practice and my family. In the practice over the last ten years the forbearance of my two partners, Donald Macleod and Graeme Duncan, was heroic and uncomplaining. Well, at any rate, they didn't

complain to me. And not forgetting our staff; I have worked with many marvellous dental nurses, hygienists, receptionists and practice managers over the years. Their hard work and professionalism have allowed me to treat our patients better, indeed, I could not have done it without them and I am delighted to see so many of them here today.

And then of course there is my family. Irene and our two children, Malcolm and Lesley, who have always been completely supportive and understanding of my commitment to my profession and to the BDA. I cannot thank them enough.

As I said earlier, being President of the Association is a great honour and every president I have known has expressed how daunted they were when they contemplated the roll of past presidents. I am no less daunted and particularly during this year, the 125th birthday of the BDA, the sense of responsibility to the history and traditions of the Association is heightened.

When one reads the history of the foundation of the Association one is struck by how similar were our founders' concerns to our own; standards of education and practice, the formation and maintenance of a register and the development of a profession based on sound science and ethics were what informed the debate, then as now. It is also interesting to note how clearly such eminent men, and it was all men in those days, saw the need for dentistry to be distinct, but not separate from, medicine. They also saw, from the beginning, that this should be a British Dental Association and I am sure they would be gratified to see today the strength of the Association throughout the UK and the modern image which it projects through the new BDA National Offices in Belfast, Cardiff and Stirling and its refurbished London offices. They would surely remember the first time the BDA Conference came to Glasgow because it was only seven years after the foundation of the Association. Indeed, in the first ten years of the Association its conferences were held in places as far apart as Plymouth, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Glasgow, Manchester and Exeter, surely an early indication of a determination to be a truly UK wide organisation.

And of course they gave us our splendid motto *Ars, Scientia, Mores* – Art, Science and Ethics. Did any profession ever have a better motto? It is at one and the same time a concise description of the dental profession and a challenge to its members to live up to such high ideals.

Many of you will have seen the splendid portrait of our first president, Sir John Tomes, which now hangs in the foyer of 64, Wimpole Street. Sir John has a rather pensive, even disapproving look on his

face so I thought I might ask him, 125 years on, to step out of his portrait and return as the Ghost of Dentistry Past to inspect his successors' stewardship of the Association and of the profession which he and his colleagues so carefully nurtured in its early days. In a year where major and fundamental change in the provision of dentistry is taking place throughout the UK, a year that promises to be of great significance to the profession and the BDA, how are we living up to our founders' expectations in the art, science and ethics of dentistry?

As far as the Association is concerned Sir John would no doubt note our recent financial difficulties but I believe we have addressed those problems swiftly and with determination and transparency. As a member of the Finance Committee which was set up to deal with the financial crisis and with particular responsibility for the initial restructuring plan, I know only too well how stressful this was for everyone and in particular our staff. Their responsible and constructive approach did much to ensure that the swift and effective restructuring, which was absolutely essential to achieve the financial turn round, was put in place with the minimum delay. I can assure them that their role has been much appreciated by the members and officers of the Association.

I believe that we have come out of this experience as a stronger Association and one that is clearer about its role and its priorities and about what it wants to achieve for its members, but we are not complacent. There is still much to do and we cannot relax for a minute the rigour of our financial constraints, but we are clearly on the right road and intend to stay there.

I am sure Sir John would be impressed with our rising levels of membership and with this year's conference and exhibition which is the biggest the BDA has ever had. Our staff now provide a wider range of services to more members than ever before and we continually look to improve and expand those services where we can.

If Sir John widened his focus he would see the BDA serving its members in a changing world where scientific and clinical advances continue to transform treatment options for our patients in both the art and science of dentistry. He need only look at the Conference programme to see that. He might be impressed by the renewed emphasis on public health measures in the provision of oral health care and the increasing reliance on Evidence Based Dentistry. On the other hand, I am sure he would be absolutely dismayed to see that in Scotland the Scottish Executive, despite its avowed intention to improve dental health in Scotland, has not pursued the fluoridation of public water supplies.

Politicians, with the apparent moral fibre of earthworms, have caved in to electoral expediency and the anti-scientific claptrap peddled by the tabloid press and some members of the Scottish Parliament.

Sir John might be surprised at the expectations our patients have for the relationship with those who provide their care and at their expectations of the care that they receive. He would recognise from his own time the dilemma of an entrepreneurial profession trying to square the ethical circle of being a health profession with one foot firmly planted in the world of commerce and lifestyle. But, he would surely welcome the fact that dentists throughout the UK have refused to compromise standards at the diktat of politicians; politicians whose only concern seems to be access and never mind quality of care for patients or the working conditions of dental staff. Aesthetic sensibilities may come and go, techniques and materials change and improve but the bedrock, the essence of any profession is ethics. Art, Science, Ethics is a proud and challenging motto. Art, Science, Access is merely a political slogan.

Sir John would be delighted, and I know I would say this, that initially at its own expense and with the aim of raising standards of patient care, the profession introduced and developed Vocational Training (VT) in General Dental Practice. However, I believe he would be disappointed that, in England, the dedication of advisers and trainers has not been matched by a clear and unequivocal commitment from the government that VT should remain as an educational tool and not degenerate into being merely a means of workforce planning and direction.

And so, before I ask the shade of Sir John to step back into his portrait, I might play a little trick on him and take him to a modern dental school to see his reaction to the changed demographics of his profession. I wonder what an eminent Victorian like he would think of the emphasis on the expanded dental team or the number of young women in the profession (actually, it might cheer him up a bit). I

think I would need to explain to him that the dynamic of the dental team is changing and, in all spheres of dentistry, is allowing us to deliver care more effectively to our patients.

Being the man he is, or rather was, I suspect Sir John might well surprise us by saying, "That's marvellous. The Dental Team, I like the sound of that and, of course, they will all be members of the British Dental Association?"

I would have to say, "No, only dentists can be members of the BDA. That's the way you set it up, Sir John."

"But, for goodness sake man, that was 125 years ago. What have you been doing all these years? You tell me you value the dental team so unless you are all merely paying lip service to this idea isn't it about time all team members can be members of the BDA?"

So, there you are, young Craig. Think about it. There's a challenge for you on our 125th birthday."

And then, in a puff of mercury vapour, Sir John would be gone, back into his portrait for another 125 years.

It is generally a conceit of the present to patronise the past and to underestimate the future. The past may well be another country and they certainly did do things differently there but in bidding farewell to Sir John, our Ghost of Dentistry Past, I think we should congratulate him and the other founders of the British Dental Association on the ambition they showed 125 years ago for our then

fledgling profession. We, their successors, cannot predict and must not underestimate what the future may bring but we should promise that we will try and match their vision for the next 125 years and beyond.

For my own part, in thanking the members of the British Dental Association for the great honour of the presidency, I can assure you all that over the coming year my only concerns will be to maintain the reputation and dignity of the British Dental Association and, of course, to promote the Art, Science and Ethics of dentistry.



Sir John Tomes