Are we using our educational resources to our best advantage?

The *British Dental Journal* values dental education as shown by publishing this supplement. The articles are written by committed educators who value the dissemination of educational research and wish to share their knowledge of new method to communicate teaching and learning skills.

However the demand for educational material is increasing dramatically and it is falling on fewer and fewer people to deliver it. The pool of educators varies. Traditionally there are dental academics from our teaching schools and other establishments. There are also enthusiastic dental practitioners who have moved towards dental education during their career. Such individuals have entered postgraduate education normally after being a vocational trainer or via a clinical attachment. All of these people, academics and general practitioners have sacrificed their valuable time to progress up the educational ladder either through courses or studying for higher qualifications with either a university or one of the Royal Colleges.

In spite of the influx of such enthusiastic educators, there is still a shortfall of people willing to undertake the demand for teaching and learning. One of the most worrying aspects is the decrease in clinical academics who undertake the teaching of our dental students. The Government is committed to tackling the problem of the shortage of dentists by increasing the number of students which almost certainly will include opening a new dental school. It is difficult to imagine how such changes will take place against a shortage of teachers. The increase in CPD and the postgraduate activity often results in difficulties in finding good individuals to present at postgraduate seminars. Good

speakers are in short supply and the situation will become more of a problem as time progresses.

How may we rectify the situation? Many educators and administrators view technology as the answer and the impressive buzz word is “distributed learning”. This may simply be defined as distance learning that makes use of information technology. It includes most types of distance learning that use available technology such as video-conferencing; web based e-learning materials and email. It also encompasses the more traditional technologies such as video and telephone conferencing. Distributed learning is very similar to e-learning but it is distinct in that it combines online learning with traditional materials. The important point to put across is that it is flexible and it puts the learner in control

allowing them to access materials anywhere and at anytime.

Distributed learning both at undergraduate and postgraduate level is one solution to maximising the limited number of teachers that are available to educate dentists. It will assist in making teaching materials available to the many learners that require it, wherever they are.

However, clever technology alone is not enough to provide a high quality educational experience. This will still depend fundamentally on the commitment and skills of those individuals who are prepared to give up part or all of their time to create the learning materials.

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