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'Arise Sir Vivian...'

Anthony Kravitz presents a short biography of Sir James Carlisle, former Governor-General of Antigua and Barbuda and one of the BDA's most interesting and illustrious former members.

At the beginning of 2007 I was undertaking a research project for the Commonwealth Dental Association and I was looking at a website for the Antiguan government. In the middle of a page about the Governor-General, Sir James Carlisle, was a short, but prominent sentence: 'He is a member of the British Dental Association.'

Now I was not aware that it was a prerequisite to becoming Her Majesty's representative in any country that one has to be a member of the BDA (although I am sure the Chief Executive would find this a very favourable policy). The Governor-General has his own website and I was able to explore further. But I wanted to know even more, so, using a dental contact I have in Barbados, I was given the phone numbers of four dentists on the island. I was in luck with the first one I phoned – he had actually purchased his practice from Sir James and knew him well.

He hand-delivered a letter from myself to the Governor's mansion, as none of the email addresses I had appeared valid and I received an emailed response from Sir James's secretary. Sir James would be in London shortly and would like to meet up with me. I was given a UK phone number contact.

So it was that we met up for a couple of hours in Sir James' London hotel in June. He could not spare the time to

come along to the BDA, but he said that he had actually visited us in Wimpole Street a couple of years earlier. When I mentioned that I had not heard of this he said 'Well of course I went as an ordinary member and someone showed me around. It was not relevant to tell them of my position.' I think this sums up this very charming, affable and 'down to earth' man.

James Carlisle was born in 1937 in Antigua and was brought up in a relatively poor household, in which his mother struggled to bring up five children on her own – his father having been killed towards the end of the Second World War, fighting with British Forces. He had his early education in Antigua and after (he says) achieving relatively poor GCE results, he joined the RAF in the UK. He was allocated to the medical services division. It was his occasional work in the dental department, as an assistant, that started an interest in dentistry which ultimately became an obsession to be a dentist.

He left the Forces after five years and self-funded study for A-levels in Northampton College of Technology. He passed in relevant subjects and at a high enough grade for entry into dental school, as a mature student. He was accepted for Dundee and entered into dental training in 1967. During his five years there he became the representative of the School



Sir James Carlisle

on the British Dental Students Association committee.

He graduated in 1972 and after some locum and associate jobs in Scotland he opened his own practice as a 'squat' in the centre of Perth. He had joined the BDA from the outset of his career (he was to remain a member until shortly after he removed his name from the GDC dental register in 2003), and he remembers attending many section meetings in

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Sir James with the author at their meeting in June 2007

his early days. He recalls coming across another Perth dentist, Alastair MacLean, who eventually became Scottish Secretary of the BDA.

However, the yearning to return to his home country became overwhelming and in 1979 he decided to sell the practice and return home. By that time he and his then wife (who is also a dentist) had built their list of patients to 5,000.

He says that the first year back in Antigua was very hard as the few dentists providing dental care did not welcome the competition from another practitioner. So after a year of struggle he returned to the UK, this time to Suffolk in England, where joined the practice of

Douglas Pike as an associate working in the GDS. He recalls fondly this period in his life. He tells of Douglas's work for the 'Call-me-Doctor' campaign and his own active support for this. But, after a year in England he felt the need to return to his home island again, when Antigua and Barbuda became an independent country (of 70,000 people) within the Commonwealth, and he opened his own practice there in 1981. His friendship with Douglas remained and he says that from time to time he and Douglas swapped practices for short periods, for working holidays.

Whilst building up what was to become a successful dental practice he

also served as a Dental Officer in the Public Service. He developed a fluoride programme for children and instituted a scheme for free dental service for children and senior citizens. He helped to start an Antiguan Dental Association and became its Vice President. He also immersed himself into various community and national projects, including becoming Chairman of the National Parks Authority, Chairman of the Tabitha Senior Citizens Home and a member of the Medical Board. In 1991 he graduated from the American School of Laser Dentistry and also became a member of the International Society of Laser Dentists.

In life, opportunities often arise from the unlikeliest of encounters. The then Prime Minister of Antigua had become a patient of James some years earlier and in 1993 he asked James to accept a nomination to Her Majesty the Queen, to become Governor-General. Sir James says he was astonished, but accepted and the recommendation was confirmed by Her Majesty. He sold his practice, using an advert in the *BDJ*, but as he did not really know exactly what the new position entailed he contracted to continue working at the practice as a dentist for half a day a week. Of course, we do not really expect Her Majesty to have another 'day job' other than Queen, so as her representative in Antigua he could not have one either and he had to give this up after a short while. But he continued paying his annual retention fee to the GDC, his subscription to the BDA and undertaking some CPD in the Caribbean region for most of his period as Governor-General. He read his *BDJs* avidly and was very up-to-date with all the personalities and politics of UK dentistry. Indeed, he says he had hoped to return to dentistry after completion of his term as Governor-General – a hope

shared by many of his patients – but now accepts that this is not now possible.

So, on June 10 1993 he was sworn in as the second Governor-General of Antigua and Barbuda, the first native-born Antiguan to be appointed to the office. He was appointed to be a Knight Grand Cross of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George (GCMG) later that year and was invested at Buckingham Palace in July 1994. He was awarded an honorary FDSRCS from Edinburgh in 1996; and an honorary Doctor of Law from the Andrews University of Michigan for his work for the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

As Governor-General, Sir James became titular head of more than 30 charitable and benevolent organisations, and hosted many functions on their behalf. His work also involved investitures of honours, including those awarded by Her Majesty the Queen and Antiguan honours recommended by the Prime Minister of Antigua. Thus, international cricketer Vivian Richards, arguably the most famous Antiguan in the world – described by the bible of cricket, Wisden, as one of the five greatest cricketers of the 20th century – was awarded an Antiguan knighthood

and was dubbed as such by Sir James in 2000. Sir James insists that he used a standard sword for this purpose and not a scalpel or gingivectomy knife!

Sir James's visit this year was mainly to have a private audience with Her Majesty, to formally advise her of his impending retirement on July 1 2007. He said that he had met the Queen on a number of occasions. In 2006, when he came to the UK for the Queen's 80th birthday celebrations, as had all the Governors-General, he received an invitation from her to join him in her private box at Royal Ascot the following week. He recounted that he and his wife had had a wonderful day in her company.

Following his retirement Sir James has promised to return to dentistry, by offering his services to various philanthropic and charitable organisations in whatever way they feel is appropriate. Sir James is married to Nalda Amelia and he has three sons and two daughters. His youngest daughter is following in her father's footsteps by looking to enter dental school in North America later this year.

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