How could associates survive without dentistry?

Shaun Sellars writes about his experience of surviving the pandemic as an associate dentist

2020 wasn't supposed to work out like this. I'd started a new position in a great practice in January, and by March things were running smoothly. For weeks there had been regular news pieces on the mysterious new virus that had been wreaking havoc in China, then spreading to Europe. In hindsight, it was inevitable that we would be affected, but I don't think anyone would have been able to predict just how severe it would be.

The writing was on the wall well before the Chief Dental Officer for England's communication on 25 March. We'd already cut down on non-urgent services, and it was clear that face-to-face patient contact in general practice would cease in the immediate future.

What was less clear was how we, as a practice, and as a profession, were going to make it through the uncertain time ahead.

For those associates who don't have the financial support by means of capitation schemes or the NHS, or for that matter, their principals, the situation was dire. An unknown length of time with no money coming in and outgoings mounting has affected the mental and physical health of a vast swathe of the profession.

I, along with countless others in a similar situation, was unable to access the majority of government support. There was no option to be furloughed, and most associates were not able to access the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. The potential of having zero income at any time is daunting, but this was different. It was clear that the situation we found ourselves in could run for months, if not longer, and had the potential to change the face of dentistry permanently.

Thankfully, my situation was different. The partners of the practice immediately made it clear that I would receive the income from my private capitation list as usual, as well as the small NHS contract that I had. The reassurance from my principals that I wouldn't starve has bought them an incredible amount of goodwill on my behalf for the future. From reading various accounts on social media, I was one of the lucky ones. There have been numerous reports of associates having their pay frozen, NHS payments reduced or having to take out loans rather than have the monies owed to them passed on. This unacceptable behaviour needs calling out at every opportunity. Divisions in dentistry run deep even without this kind of disruptive conduct.

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Our town had a 'hot hub' set up almost immediately. I volunteered my services, partly because I wanted to help and partly because I needed to get away from the deluge of dental webinars that had cropped up, each with someone trying to sell their unique way of getting through the crisis with confidence.

As soon as it was feasible, I was being fit tested for a range of FFP3 masks. I failed the test. And a second. And third. I couldn't help where I was most needed. Suddenly there was the possibility that I wouldn't be able to practise dentistry at all.

It was clear to me that to survive in the future, I'd need to diversify. We are going to be living with the fallout from COVID-19 for the foreseeable future, and future local lockdowns are likely. Being an associate as my

only source of income is too risky. What form that diversification will take is still mostly an unknown, but I know that I'm not the only one planning this.

Returning to face-to-face dentistry and the new ways of working we are all currently experiencing was a challenge. Fortunately, I was allowed to be involved in drawing up our practice SOP. This level of involvement made me feel a valued member of the team, and not just the new boy who had only started a few months ago. The SOP took weeks to get right. Clearing out the mothballs from a nine surgery practice takes time. There was no way we would be able to open at the start of June. It currently runs to 44 pages, which may seem like overkill, but it covers almost every eventuality. Because of this detail, every member of staff has felt confident in their safety and the safety of patients. The practice is running smoothly, and hiccups are few and far between. I finally passed a fit test and have been back at work for the last few weeks – AGPs included.

There are plenty of positives to take from the time in lockdown. I particularly appreciated the extra time to spend with my ever-supportive wife. I helped develop a small group of Twitter dentists that act as a sounding board and support group. And I, as well as many others, have been able to take a step back and work out what's important to us.

The life of an associate will change significantly in the future. I envisage a push for more employed roles, with the guarantees and safeguards that come along with it. Those associates who didn't feel supported through the crisis may be looking for new positions. And those principals who weren't supportive will be remembered.

It's probably too early to see the longer-term effects. The crisis is ongoing. Many practices are only just starting to return to active treatment. But the lessons learned from lockdown will stay with us all for the rest of our careers. ♦

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