Challenges present opportunities

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On Tuesday 8 December we saw a world's first, as 91-year-old Margaret Keenan became recipient of the first COVID-19 jab of the mass vaccination programme.

As far as dentistry is concerned it remains to be seen whether this represents the beginning of the end of this crisis, or merely the end of the beginning.

Certainly, facing unprecedented restrictions and real uncertainty, most colleagues will struggle to recognise the service operating today from the one we saw at the outset of 2020.

At the Principal Executive (PEC) meeting in February, we will be looking ahead to develop a strategy for this new world with input from across the association. The strategy will inevitably be heavily focussed on recovery post pandemic for the profession and a BDA heavily affected by the financial and commercial stresses that COVID-19 has inflicted on us all, and will do for the foreseeable future. I was elected Chair of the PEC just over three months ago, and was recently elected for a three-year term back onto the PEC with the ballots concluded at the end of November.

We welcomed old and new faces, with Lauren Harrhy increasing the number of female representatives on the PEC to four – an increase in three in just over a year. We still have some way to go in addressing issues on representation and making our committees look more like the membership they serve, and this will remain centre stage.

It has already been one of our strategic aims and I am also pleased to see just a few weeks back the first meeting of our new Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee, with a real desire to gather the evidence to

tackle these issues head on, not just within the BDA, but across the profession.

Together with the launch of the Indemnity offer and extending member information and webinars through the pandemic despite the problems COVID-19 has produced, we have remarkably achieved many things set out in our strategic plan of 2018-21.

I have had an opportunity since taking up my post to meet a wide range of stakeholders, and real partnership work will be necessary to restore and rebuild services for patients and colleagues over my time in office. Sustainability of care across the UK will be a huge priority for us all.

There are imminent issues across dentistry, with the worries of students uncertain about their training timelines, and the subsequent uncertainty of their trainers in practice. There are the associates, some of whom have sadly haven't had the support that's needed, and our private colleagues who despite the best efforts to secure adequate financial support have been left out in the cold by government. Our hospital colleagues are still struggling with potential redeployment and salaried colleagues are struggling to get children GAs and special care patients back into treatment, the problems are wide but urgent.

It is clear also that the regulation of dentistry is in flux, with ongoing consultation in England from the CQC which will bring more frequent but a less time-consuming evaluation of practices and changes within the GDC, where we need to reverse the fear factor within the profession and ensure regulation does not punish the mistakes that as humans we inevitably will make, thus affecting the level of care offered to patients from defensive dentistry.

The pandemic has given an opportunity to re-evaluate health service provision across the UK, in Wales we see the wider participation with contractual reform, in England we still hope for contractual variation from April 2021 with a long-awaited move away from the discredited UDA, and in Scotland and Northern Ireland,

item of service post pandemic is equally unsustainable. We have seen a service that was already on the edge, come tumbling down since the end of March 2020.

The usual cycle of reorganisation of the NHS is always looming and no more so with the publication pre-Christmas of the 'Integrating Care' proposals for England. We have been engaged with the BMA on how we can collectively work on development of Primary Care Networks and this will continue this year.

During the pandemic, we saw the BDA become the place to come to for reliable information and the opening of website information to all. We are focused on the production of a new and improved website, which will offer a better and more-user friendly one-stop-shop for our members. We hope within 2021 that this will become a reality.

Within England we are due to see the publication of the Advancing Dental Care report from Health Education England in the spring, which will see some radical and interesting proposals on how dentists and their teams will be trained in the future. We have been the poor relation with regards to funding of these important roles and we need to collectively push for that to be improved.

Membership rose within the pandemic and dentists looked to the BDA for support and we must build on that, as the real success of the BDA will be by reinvesting the financial contributions of the membership into developing the services and improving the representation we can offer. I have been involved in developing a campaigning strategy for Association so we can be proactive and by strength in numbers build opportunities for success.

We all hope 2021 is so much better for us all and I will be working alongside my colleagues and staff within the organisation to do our best to ensure that for everyone. ♦

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