Mentoring: Why now?

In the first of three articles, **Mabel Saw** and **Janine Brooks** MBE introduce the concept of mentoring, touching on some of its uses in general practice, especially under the current unique climate we find ourselves in

Key points

- Mentoring: an effective way to support dentists' well-being
- Help in 'VUCA' times

Introduction

It is no surprise that many dentists are struggling to survive financially as we re-open practices to patients who have waited months to access dental care. Many are trying their best to provide some kind of dental service whilst trying to keep up with ever changing guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). There is a palpable atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty about the future whilst some dentists are even considering changing careers. Additionally, many practice owners are juggling staffing issues with clinical work, sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE) and the general business of running a smooth practice. At the same time, our traditional way of recharging our energies have been almost wiped away. Socialising with friends and family, going on holiday or even to the gym have been things that we had taken for granted, but these activities have been severely interrupted with lockdowns. Ironically, in this age of hyper connectivity, we can sometimes feel more disconnected and isolated than ever as individuals.

Current reality

It is with great interest that I read the valedictory speech of, British Dental Association President, Russ Ladwa who has boldly stated that although COVID-19 will dominate his tenure, it will not define his term of office.¹ He pledges to improve the nation's oral health and to continue Roz McMullan's legacy in promoting the health and wellbeing of dentists.

Ladwa has an impressive record in supporting mentoring. When he was Dean at

the Faculty of General Dental Practitioners (UK), (2009-2012) he and Vernon Holt who was Vice Dean of the Faculty (2008 -2011), launched a Certificate in Mentoring. Holt went on to achieve a Doctorate in Education. His thesis, *Developing an holistic and person-centred approach to professional practice and development using mentoring*² formed the basis to a series of articles on mentoring with specific reference to dentistry. This work firmly placed the wellbeing of dentists as a keystone in the provision of patient care. Holt and Ladwa highlight that delivering safe patient care is intimately entwined with a happy and healthy dental workforce. In particular, Holt importantly identified that the dental profession are individuals who have human needs which should not be forgotten.²

Mentoring and burnout

With so much on our professional plate at the moment, the inevitable question that comes to most of us is 'can I afford the time and money to think about mentoring?' In my opinion, the more appropriate question is 'can we afford *not* to think about mentoring?' Because if we carry on assuming that dentistry is just as we had known it pre-COVID-19 but with added PPE, longer procedures and reduced income, then we are sleep walking and failing to acknowledge the additional strain on top of our already stressful lives. We are disregarding the harsh reality of chronic exhaustion and the inability to recharge, engage or even remember what it was like to enjoy dentistry – classic signs of burnout.³

The current situation will test our personal and professional relationships and leadership skills. We have to realise that our mental well-being is important if we are to function at our best to deliver our best. Without our usual mode of recharging, our mental health *has* to be prioritised, *now* more so than ever.⁴ Mentoring offers support and removes the sense of isolation that grips many in the profession. It can help us see some light at the end of the seemingly endless tunnel of gloom.

Mentoring, a way forward

The Royal College of Physicians states that there have been numerous studies and reports on the wellbeing of NHS staff but despite this, little change has been implemented.⁵ A review of the literature on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) by the Association for Dental Education (ADEE) suggests that CPD should be more than a tick-box quantitative approach to the number of hours.⁶ It highlights the need to go beyond quantifiable measures of CPD and to involve the higher thinking of dentists including reflective practice. It is encouraging that enhanced CPD with the GDC reflects this mind-set⁷ and I discuss this further in the second article.

Our dental training has traditionally been a process of regurgitating facts and some dentists might find the concept of introspection and reflection bewildering, being more accustomed to the busy-ness of carrying out treatments.

Yet if the GDC is driving the change towards a more reflective type of practice, we

need someone by our side to help us analyse how our attitudes affect our behaviours. Many of us in the profession have been too used to *do-ing* and some of us struggle to understand about *be-ing*.² Mentors help us to uncover our deeper values and inner purpose.

But I hear many voices arguing that there is simply not enough time to wallow in self introspection and reflection. There are *too* many things to attend to and this is simply just NOT the right time for mentoring.

However, let's just take a moment here to ask: can we afford to close the practice because of our own ill health? Can the practice deliver its best care if staffing is below the necessary level due to long term staff sickness from work-related stress? Can we afford to have patient complaints which place huge stress on the team who then have their eye off the ball and consequently, performance dips? Are our friends and family quietly concerned about our well-being but are hesitant to discuss this? Mentoring at this time makes perfect sense, personally, professionally and economically. We owe it to ourselves, our patients, our staff and our families to be the best we can be and we need support to do that.

Mentoring and career change

The term VUCA, a concept that builds on the leadership theories of Bennis and Nanus,⁸ is more familiar in the corporate world than in dentistry even though in reality we are already experiencing how Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) dentistry is. With so much uncertainty about our own futures currently, some will undoubtedly be feeling torn between weathering the current storm and leaving the profession. This is often mixed with an insidious sense of guilt and loss as many of us consider that we are defined by what we do and that our identities are intertwined with dentistry. It can sometimes leave a feeling of being stuck within a persona that some might be more than ready to shed. When it dawns that we have nothing more than our clinical skills to offer to the outside world, it can bring our whole universe crashing down. Others might choose to quell this rising tide by immersing themselves even more into work so that they do not have to face the proverbial elephant in the room. Of course, dentists are so much more than their clinical or technical skills, but it can require a trusted supporter to help us uncover our talents and wider skills.

Mentoring provides a safe haven to explore our thoughts and emotions, giving our

dreams a test drive whilst we consider if it is a journey we are prepared to take. It is by examining our own thoughts and feelings that we allow ourselves to delve further into the underlying reasons for our desire for change. Is this a fleeting thought? Or are we suppressing a deeper inner desire that is actually more congruent with our true selves? Don't we owe it to ourselves to at least acknowledge and explore this feeling instead of denying its existence?

Coaching and mentoring helps us discover our resources and strengths, which we sometimes fail to see beneath the façade of our clinical skills. We are more than 'just dentists'. By tapping into and developing our personal skills and understanding our personality traits, coaching and mentoring can unlock our potential, revealing possibilities as we contemplate venturing out to a wider world beyond drilling. Many of these skills can be acquired, indeed we could be unaware that we already possess such soft skills. Yet such abilities are invaluable and highly sought after in the corporate world. More importantly, they are transferrable, opening up horizons yet to be discovered, an exciting prospect.⁹ Mentoring has been used in many industries in the corporate world, including healthcare. It has turned around businesses like Microsoft.¹⁰ A total of 70% of Fortune 500 companies now implement mentoring programmes which are becoming a necessity and even an expectation.¹¹

Conclusion

Mentoring offers a secure environment to explore who we want to become and how to achieve this. Mentoring can help dental professionals and dentistry get up to speed with the corporate world. We owe it to ourselves to embrace the benefits that mentoring can bring to our practices and our lives. Now is the perfect time to work with a mentor. It is probably the most cost effective and long-lasting decision you will ever make.

In their second article Mabel and Janine explore how mentoring fits in with the General Dental Council's 'Moving Upstream' ethos ♦

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