Smiling faces

David Westgarth

Editor, *BDJ in Practice*

In almost every meeting I'm in these days, there's an agenda item or time devoted to discussing when we will return to some sort of normality again. Beyond the mightily impressive feat – if I do say so myself – of the *BDJ portfolio* being published and sent to members on time every month without fail since March 2020, little else is what I'd call normal.

Which is why there was a great deal of excitement for me last month when I knew three face-to-face conferences were taking place. I'd almost forgot how to plan and pack for events – the last event I went to was mydentist's conference in Liverpool in October of 2019. After choosing the British Orthodontic Society's annual conference at the Midland Hotel in Manchester on the strength of the programme, it was time to do something that used to feel very normal, but had a sense of grandeur about it.

The landscape shaped by COVID-19 meant even telling a friend that I was going to a conference – with actual people – prompted fits of giggles. It is truly the little things that have made the difference these 18 months, and the resumption of face-to-face conferences could not come soon enough.

But what would the atmosphere be like? Would we treat each other like leppers,

refusing handshakes, embraces and sitting at least six chairs between you and the nearest person ensuring COVID-19 concerns outweighed the norm or would it be warm, invigorating and tangibly excitable, given that those in attendance may not have met in-person since the BOS' last conference in Glasgow two years ago, and the norm would outweigh COVID concerns?

Perhaps what I found is the template for conferences in the future. Exhibition shows are different – they require venues like the NEC in Birmingham due to the very nature of the exhibition stands – but for conferences, this felt like the way forward. The irony certainly wasn't lost on me when I arrived to a registration pack that included a mask and sanitising hand gel, but that should be the new normal for conferences and exhibitions – safety first. And yet, that was the last real visible reminder of the horror we have all experienced since COVID-19 arrived. The trade stands were happy to chat to you – some wore masks, some didn't. Delegates over tea, coffee and lunch were happy to chat about mainly how good it was to see the person they were talking to – again, some wore masks, some didn't. And both social events were exactly the same, with some delegates I spoke to openly being concerned about so many people in one venue, but those concerns appeared (at least in those I spoke to) to be overridden by the smiling faces of the face-to-face interaction humanity craves and needs to function. I have lost track of the number of digital events I have been invited to, attended and turned down simply because

there was no balance – dental conferences, exhibitions and even social events went online through necessity.

For the delegates that couldn't make it or didn't feel comfortable enough to make it, the hybrid model of online plus in-person satisfied their demand to learn, and I truly think that is the way forward. Offering delegates a choice and not either/or allows for flexibility, improves the carbon footprint of the event and gives you greater opportunities to join and engage in conferences. There is no substitute for having a face-to-face discussion with someone – you can't read body language, facial expressions or pick up tone anywhere near as easily online as you do when they're sat opposite you. For sessions like Grant McIntyre's emotional, spine-tingling recollection of his personal battle with COVID-19, there was not a sound to be heard in the auditorium, other than his. You could feel how engaged the audience were, how hooked on every word we had become learning of his quite extraordinary battle. It was one of those 'I can't believe I was there to hear that' moments, and no online platform will ever come close to recreating the atmosphere during that presentation.

It is testament to the organising committee and conference chair David Waring that at the time of writing, no known cases of COVID were identified and mushroomed at the conference. Holding it may have been a risk, but for me, it was worth it for the normal, smiling faces. ♦

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