

A fine mess



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David Westgarth

Editor, *BDJ in Practice*

Throughout many of Oliver Hardy and Stan Laurel's sketches, Ollie would say to Stan: 'This is a fine mess you've gotten us into.'

It feels quite appropriate to use, not because without humour the situation we find ourselves in is dire (the situation *is* dire), but because you imagine there are politicians and decision-makers across governmental departments repeating this over and over again to a green, bacteria stress ball with COVID-19 written on it.

Lack of funding? COVID-19 mate. Lack of access? That darn COVID-19 again. Unfavourable working conditions? Yes, you've guessed it. The wind blowing in a direction that displeases the Gods? COVID.

That is not to say COVID-19 isn't at fault for the landscape we see today – it clearly is – but don't you get the impression it's the scapegoat and being used to paper over the cracks of every problem that existed pre-March 2020?

The recent £50m injection aside, do you remember a lack of funding for dentistry was

a big reason the profession was struggling pre-March 2020? Do you remember that patients would say accessing an NHS dentist was just as difficult in March 2020 as it is today? Do you remember that members of the profession were considering turning their backs on NHS dentistry – and dentistry altogether – pre-March 2020 because it just wasn't a great place to be?

The very essence of dentistry is about prevention; we preach it to patients at every possible opportunity. But can we really say those who look after dentistry have had prevention at their core? If they did, would we be in such dire straits? 'There you go. There's £50m. Take it with food twice a day, and please don't come back to us if there's another problem.' After decades of neglect and underfunding, £50m isn't going to touch the sides.

It shouldn't be the profession's job to engage with disgruntled patients and explain to them these issues were also issues pre-pandemic. If you're into sadomasochism, take a look at the public's comments under any story about dentistry that appears in national media and online forums. They're a cesspit, and that's being polite. To a man and woman, every one of you is a greedy, money-grabbing merchant of death determined to ruin their lives. It's embarrassing, but it's not new, and it's

ingrained in their thought-conscience and has been for years, but seems to be extra prevalent at the moment. Why is that? Yep. COVID-19.

In this issue's cover feature, I dig into whether NHS dentistry is being privatised by stealth. It's a politically-charged question, but we've seen what happens when politics and healthcare collide throughout the pandemic. I've often asked whether time is running out on NHS dentistry, whether it is beyond saving and whether patients would be better off without it. The obvious answer is no, how dare you ask such nonsense – but as always there are nuances that produce elements of grey between the certainties of black or white.

I wonder what sixth form students assessing their career choices and universities think about dentistry. I would suggest very few – unless there are family ties to the profession – know what they're committing themselves to. I wonder what dental students think. For new students, they won't even know what dentistry is like without PPE, social distancing, webinars and fallow time. The same applies to those who have graduated during the pandemic.

To be even asking these questions shows how much of a fine mess we're really in. ♦

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