

EDITORIAL

Student editor Sophia Antoniou on the challenge ahead for dental students in 2021

Happy New Year! Hope you have all thoroughly enjoyed Christmas safely and are ready for a fresh start to a promising year ahead. Though I am sure 2020 has been a year many of us want to leave behind, we may learn a vast amount through reflection on all that happened last year.

2020, a year to be remembered. What does one do when the whole world gets turned on its head? Social beings such as ourselves have re-programmed our affable nature to instead stand 2m distantly apart from each-other, interact without expression, half of our faces masked. If I had told my clinical tutors last year, that they would be delivering babies on our campus, the Royal London, they would have roared with laughter in my face. 'But we're dentists!' they would have exclaimed, with questioning looks. During the first lockdown period, Barts transformed the dental hospital into a birthing ward and many of our tutors were redeployed to work in that area (as well as on many other wards). The good general medical knowledge, familiarity within clinical setting and full set of immunisations, presented them with an ideal background to contribute to the NHS' efforts to fight COVID-19. Our tutors and professors were ensuring the smooth delivery of new lives into the midst of global chaos. Throughout the murky government advice and uncertain future, the transferable skillset of dental professionals was illuminated.

Over the lockdown period, I have been involved with virtually interviewing applying medical and dental students. Though it is incredibly cliché, around 90% of the applicants that I interviewed, mentioned their reasons for their chosen career path were surrounding wanting to help, do well by others and give back to society. It can be disheartening when the world is falling apart around you and you feel that there is nothing you can do to help. Yet, there are other concerns that demand our attention, that we may rather focus on.

At some point, the host of issues that were present before COVID-19 will be awaiting confrontation. One of the crucial issues facing dentistry and society at large, is the backload of disposed single use items, numbers of which have risen exponentially, as one would expect when the world is faced with a viral pandemic and struggling to maintain critical infection control. However, our planet is suffering hugely as a result. Dentistry is one of the least environmentally friendly fields,¹ we need a revolutionary approach to reduce the vast amount of waste created by our industry, so that we may start working within 'Green dentistry'.² As students,

we are in the optimal position to learn more about how we can be the generation to form sustainable habits, in a movement dedicated towards keeping our obligation to care for the health of our planet, just as we also act in the best interest of the health of our patients and loved ones.

The side-lined issues that stand in the wake of COVID-19, will demand a collective effort from us as aspiring healthcare professionals to combat. Along with the plastic fiasco wreaking havoc on our planet, we may expect to see (when we finally see real patients again) neglected mouths with poor oral hygiene. Further exacerbated post-festive season, following sugary ginger-spiced hot beverages in tandem with the era of hidden mouths. Additionally, less patients will have seen a dentist recently and financial stresses may mean that visiting the dentist is not one's first item on the agenda. The pain and irreversible damage that has resulted from this period will be challenging for us to attempt to repair in our patients.

Nonetheless, there is hope for normality to return with fit testing, a vaccine and firm alacrity. Hopefully, this will be the end of the numerous horror stories of self-extractions at home and other extreme measures taken by poor suffering patients. To the contrary, I do not doubt that among our student readers, some of us have sincerely enjoyed attending lectures from the warmth of our beds and the ease of access to the fridge during lunchtime and late-night revision sessions. Despite the banana bread baking and longer napping times, it is disquieting to consider how our training has differed considerably from the years before us, on the same journey to grow into competent and safe beginners before graduation. Hopefully, as we shift from under the dark cloud of coronavirus, we may face towards the sun and let the shadows fall behind, to meet the new year with determination and resilience.

References

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