EDITORIAL

Education, education, education

Stephen Hancocks OBE
Editor-in-Chief

The *BDJ* Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews. Please direct your correspondence to the News Editor, Kate Quinlan at k.quinlan@nature.com. Press releases or articles may be edited, and should include a colour photograph if possible.

The title comes from a famous speech in 1997 by the then UK prime minister Tony Blair who used it, possibly to parody the well known maxim of estate agents, location, location, location, or merely to emphasise his government's commitment by using the orator's rule of three.

Since my own undergraduate *alma mater*, UCH Dental School, had been closed a year prior to that to the best of my knowledge he wasn't referring particularly to dental education as we were doubtless in one of the peaks of apparent over-abundance of dentists. How much of a long lost world that now seems, yet at 23 years, give or take, it is about as long ago as the young dentists qualifying this year were born. A further tranche of the same number of years will find them middle-aged and approximately mid-career but will it still be in dentistry? And before you dismiss that as an editor's unnecessary provocation ponder that in 1997 we hardly had the internet, no one had heard of social media and e-learning would probably have been interpreted as a Yorkshire schoolteacher's description of what he presented to his class.

Much is written and discussed on the matter of dental education starting from the premise of do we need it at all, since 'remote' dental care is now a reality moderated by scans and artificial intelligence (see the Upfront pages in this issue)? Then moving to the contrary view that we need more of it than ever before so as to be able to tackle new challenges – possible resulting from the former. As ever, the middle ground is likely to hold sway in that the current length of education is about right, but it is the quality and the balance of content that needs adjustment. Merely cramming more in serves only to stress and overstretch students while quite probably undermining the value of the whole. The devil is in the detail. How much of what to include and how little of

something else? No curriculum can expand inexorably and tough decisions have to be made, but based on what? Most sensibly the foundation would be predicated on what the newly qualified dentist needs both immediately and to prepare her or him with the skills and knowledge to guide the rest of their career. But here we rub up again against the question of what they will be doing for the rest of their career. It calls to mind the response of the old man in a country lane who, when stopped and asked for directions to a certain place replies that if that was his destination he would 'not start from here.'

The fact of the matter is that no one knows, all we can do is to best guess based on knowledge from the past, disease and

the advantages of blended teaching as a mix between face-to face and online learning.¹

Early on in its chequered history from market place spectacle to respectability, dentistry was learnt on the job by means of apprenticeship. This was seen then, and remains in many walks of life now, as being wholly acceptable and reasonable. Indeed, the progress in the last three or four decades from voluntary to mandatory vocational training through to foundation dentist stands testament to the lasting value of this strand of generational knowledge transfer. Various authors have explored the practical problems of this scenario, such as Hanks *et al.*,² who concluded that successful negotiation between trainers and trainees was the most

'No curriculum can expand inexorably and tough decisions have to be made'

social norms of today and trends that might stretch ahead. For example, one school of thought posits that the future will involve a much greater degree of team working. Consequently it is a 'good thing' that dental students are taught alongside other dental care professionals so as to prepare them for the brave new reality. Yet such a scheme hardly finds practical application in the current provision of oral healthcare services, meaning that co-operative skill sets so learnt fall fallow as soon as the individuals have qualified. Another, more extreme variant suggests that all dental care students begin from scratch in the same direction of travel, branching out into dentist, hygienist, therapist and so forth after a certain distance of learning. Others, focussing on the how as much as the why, advocate

successful route to creating rounded and competent clinicians. They further suggested that dialogue between undergraduate and postgraduate dental education systems would help to increase the veracity of this transition, thereby boosting the chances of supporting new graduates in both the early years of their working lives and their longer term career decisions. Questions, questions, questions. Few answers.

References

1. Hussain F, Leinonen E, Millar B J. Blended learning and an exploration of student expectations on a Master's prosthodontic programme with reassessment after five years. *Br Dent J* 225: 441–447.
2. Hanks S, Coelho C, Coster C. Prepared for practice and equipped for employment: what do dental foundation trainers think of their trainees? *Br Dent J* 225: 549–555. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-020-1382-4>