Interesting times

Shaun Sellars continues his series on ethical dilemmas in dentistry which appears in every second issue of the *BDJ*.

As 2020 enters full swing, we find ourselves in a time of increasing uncertainty. A medium-sized corporate has recently closed its doors leaving patients, dentists and DCPs with unanswered questions and mounting debts. The recruitment crisis is becoming more acute every day with many practices struggling to provide services for patients simply because there aren't enough dentists. As I write this, the government is due to announce a raft of measures to help halt the spread of Covid-19, as well as mitigate the economic knock-on effect that may result. These are interesting times.

As these pressures mount, it becomes more likely that each of us is going to have to make difficult decisions. Decisions that will affect our jobs, businesses and the livelihoods of those that rely on our ability to provide our services.

With this in mind, it would seem prudent to discuss the concept of ethical fading.

American psychologists Ann Tenbrunsel and David Messick¹ coined the term in 2004 to describe how unethical behaviour can become readily accepted in business. As a concept, it isn't limited to the corporate world and can apply directly to dental practice.

Ethical fading occurs when we become so focused on the other aspects of a decision that its ethical dimensions are disregarded. The moral features of the decision-making process completely disappear from view. We then justify our actions by deceiving ourselves, often in simple ways such as using euphemisms like 'creative accounting' rather than the more accurate, if less palatable, description of fraud. At the same time, we're able to claim that we have fulfilled our moral obligations.

For example, if there's a shortage of face masks due to the outbreak of a new virus, should businesses be cashing in on this

by inflating prices? This is clearly an oversimplification, but ethical fading can push the delicate balance of decision making down the slippery slope into dishonesty.

How do we guard against this becoming the norm in times of difficulty? The obvious answer would be to emphasise the importance of ongoing ethical education in business and practice, but Tenbrunsel and Messick claim that this doesn't go far enough. The key driver to ethical fading, it is claimed, is the act of self-deception and subsequent justification of actions.

To combat the danger of ethical fading, then, it seems that we need to be constantly aware of the decisions we make, taking a mindfulness-like approach of maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our decision-making process.

It is at times of stress that we most need to keep our wits about us. Unfortunately, it's at these exact times that doing so becomes most difficult. We're making ethical-based decisions all the time without even realising it. Paying close attention to everything we do isn't going to solve the issues, but it's a start in recognising that the problem exists.

In Tenbrunsel and Messick's words: 'As with most embedded problems, the first step – recognising and accepting the problem – is often the most difficult.'

References

1. Tenbrunsel A, Messick D. Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behaviour. *Soc Just Res* 2004; **17**: 223–236.

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The *BDJ* will now have a paper envelope

The print copies of the *BDJ* will now be delivered in a paper envelope, starting with Volume 228 issue 6 [the current issue], published on 27 March 2020.

The *BDJ* has received a number of letters and queries in recent years regarding the polywrap that each issue was posted in, up until now. The plastic wrapping could be recycled in appropriate points such as recycling bins for plastic supermarket bags. Costs for alternative postal packaging were prohibitive.

James Sleight, Publisher of the *BDJ* Portfolio, based at Springer Nature, commented: 'Springer Nature has been investigating alternatives to single-use polywrap for some time, but until now we weren't satisfied that there was a solution that was

both environmentally more beneficial and also economically viable. However, by working closely with suppliers we are now able to move to sustainably-sourced paper envelopes, which are easily recyclable as part of normal mixed household recycling collections.

'Paper envelopes are more expensive than plastic polywrap; however, by taking advantage of more efficient postal sorting options they also allow us to make some savings in distribution costs. Overall, we expect the change to be cost-neutral for BDA members.'

Postal distribution of *BDJ In Practice* (once a month with the *BDJ*) and the bound-in *Evidence-Based Dentistry* (four times a year) is included in the change.

From time to time the *BDJ* will still be delivered in a polywrap if a complimentary product is enclosed.