EDITORIAL

Something beginning with 'c'

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I wonder whether epidemiologists getting bored on long journeys play a professional version of the game 'I spy'? I spy with my little eye a disease beginning with 'c'. I spy with my little eye COVID-19 – 35,000 deaths in about four months (at the time of writing). I spy with my little eye contaminated drinking water – UNICEF estimates that 6,000 children die per day. Yes, you did read that correctly; per day. I spy with my little eye 'caries' – 2.5 billion people (yes, you read that correctly too; billion) – have untreated caries. Untreated. We think that we have a consistent attitude towards health and disease but we quite clearly do not.

The current world convulsion over the coronavirus is, on one level, understandable in the context in which it is reported, the effect it has on economics and the fear we have of the unknown. I am not for one moment saying that we shouldn't take it with the utmost seriousness or regard it as anything other than a threat to the world as we know it. It kills, but so do lots of other diseases and conditions and collectively we effectively shrug and say it is 'just one of those things'. Are we right to do so? What strikes me about the differences between the way in which we view and behave towards coronavirus and contaminated water and caries and all the other conditions from a to z, is acceptance. What do we accept as inevitable and what do we accept as tolerable? It is also very much about prevention. In the UK, as in many other countries, the government has taken unprecedented action to ensure as many people as possible stay at home, don't have social contact or sufficient physical proximity to spread the virus. The approach is famously to 'flatten the curve' as the treatment and hopefully curative resources are just not available to serve the number of us requiring hospitalisation if prevention is not exercised.

As professionals we battle everyday with the ravages and effects of microorganisms most notably in relation to caries and periodontal diseases. I have written

previously about how our professional worlds are constructed purely on the activity of organisms we cannot even see.¹ But the truth is suddenly made naked isn't it? When routine dental care ceases the first question is not 'who is going to prevent my oral disease now?' but 'what happens if I get toothache?'

One of the lessons that is manifest from the approach to COVID-19 is that of working together to 'beat' the virus. Much militaristic language has been lavished on the process. We are at war, we are fending off the threat; we are united against the enemy. Yet for decades, centuries we have not been, and are not still, seriously taking any of these actions against caries. I can quite understand how you might very well think that even

posed the question 'how can the oral health and dental industries benefit from enabling positive behaviour in caries prevention and control amongst patients and the public?' Participants from dental industry, governments, public health departments, clinicians and academics hunkered down to try and move the caries debate forwards in terms of: driving behaviour change, operationalising and paying for the 4Ds system of CariesCare International,³ influencing regulation and public policy, and getting oral health onto corporate and social responsibility agendas. The positive detail is contained in the report and the next steps are to be guided by moving towards oral and dental health through partnership.

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mentioning corona and caries on the same page is inappropriate but sometimes it takes monumental events to make us take stock, examine our attitudes, question our priorities and learn from our approach to solving a problem. Could we do better?

So, whilst not diminishing its seriousness, setting coronavirus aside for a moment and there will be a time in the future when it is not the sole and dominant focus of our everyday existence (remember Brexit? what happened to climate change?) I would like to point to one ray of sunlight that has beamed through the gloom. A report on a Policy Lab meeting held in London last autumn has, I believe, shown us a possible way forward in managing caries through, like the current pandemic, bringing people together.² It

My earnest hope is that we will learn a lot from the way in which experts, governments, societies, populations and individuals tackle the coronavirus pandemic and that the lessons will stay with us for a long time. Optimistically, I spy with my little eye something beginning with 'c': collaboration. ■

References

1. Hancocks S. If only it was as simple as bugs. *Br Dent J* 2012; **213**: 93.
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