The courtesy title 'Doctor' 25 years on – the story

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Key points

Prior to 1995, use of the courtesy title 'Doctor' by dentists was not permitted.

The positive outcome was gained from a sharply divided General Dental Council, reluctant to address this controversial issue.

The uptake of the courtesy title by established practitioners was slower than expected; however, the uptake by newly qualified young dentists, following a long course, is enthusiastic.

Abstract

Prior to November 1995, use of the courtesy title 'Doctor' by dentists carried the threat of a charge of serious professional conduct. On 14 November 1995, following a long campaign, the General Dental Council voted to remove this prohibition effectively allowing UK dentists to use the courtesy title 'Doctor'. Twenty-five years on, the leader of the 'Call Me Doctor' campaign recalls the story and assesses the establishment of custom and tradition in relation to the use of the courtesy title.

UK dentists have enjoyed the freedom of using the courtesy title 'Doctor' now for some 25 years. Things changed in November 1995 after many years of campaigning and pressure from within the profession.

There is an Act of Parliament, the Dentists Act 1984, which governs the dental profession in the UK, and before 1995 this Act was interpreted by the General Dental Council (GDC) to prevent use by dentists of the courtesy title. Transgression carried the threat of a charge of serious professional misconduct and, in those days, the GDC was hugely respected, if not feared. Prior to 1995, use by dentists of the courtesy title 'Doctor' was not permitted.

Against this seemingly insurmountable barrier, there was, within much of the profession, a feeling that dentists should be able to use the courtesy title 'Doctor'. It was, after all, common practice in other parts of the world, and with increasing numbers of dentists from overseas in practice here together with a higher proportion of female dentists, there was pressure to change things here. The title 'Doctor' for dentists would be a courtesy title in much the same way as the medical profession

use the courtesy title; that is, not acquired by academic qualification and right but gained by custom and tradition. Of course, anyone with a PhD or equivalent can use the title by right and of course, perversely, surgeons in this country drop the courtesy title 'Doctor' and revert to plain 'Mr/Mrs'.

Dentists in the UK were seeking the right to begin the process of establishing custom and tradition in using the courtesy title free from the threat of challenge from the GDC of serious professional misconduct.

I suppose I had always been in sympathy with this cause, but the dilemma really hit home for me when, in 1989, I did an exchange from my practice in Suffolk with a dentist in Antigua. James Carlisle had worked with me in Suffolk before returning to his home in the West Indies. The label on my suitcase changed from Mr Pike here to Dr Pike in Antigua. The difficulty occurred one day when my practice in the UK phoned to speak to Mr Pike, causing concern that I was an imposter, perhaps not even properly qualified. This challenge set me thinking. On returning to England, by pure chance, I was greeted by a report from the General Dental Practitioners Association (GDPA) saying that they were in favour of the use of the courtesy title. I telephoned the GDPA secretary – a Michael Watson. They had no plans and suggested I might like to take the matter forwards myself – OK, but how?

A dental practitioner in rural Suffolk was proposing to lead a campaign to change an act

of parliament. What hope? Indeed, there was a long line of individuals who, over the years, had written to the dental press expressing strong feelings on the matter. There had been one prominent campaign, 'Legalised Use of the Title Doctor' (LUTD), led by Ian Simpson that had not got the issue over the line. How was this campaign going to be different? I knew I could count on the help of Michael Watson and the GDPA, but I needed a mandate from the profession to drive this campaign forward, not in isolation, but with a following of committed dentists.

Through the dental press, I sought a thousand dentists and asked that they donate £10 each to give the campaign backing and credibility. My continuing with the cause was dependent on getting this level of support. Within very few weeks, my thousand dentists were signed up and so, under the banner 'Call Me Doctor', I was on my way complete with a fighting fund. I was no longer an individual. I abandoned all modesty and reservation about wanting to use the courtesy title. My head was clearly above the parapet. To avoid the risk of subsequent accusations of 'what happened to the money', the fund was made accountable to both the GDPA and the BDA, and both associations were asked to approve the 'Call Me Doctor' annual accounts.

But how to proceed? The registrar at the GDC had already set out the ground rules, including the consequences should a prosecution be successful, and he warned that I was 'heading

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into danger.' The possibility of leading a mass protest was ruled out; the only way forwards was by working with the establishment. The cause was promoted through the dental press. The use of the courtesy title in other countries was researched. I talked to the dental defence organisations and to every dental grouping I could locate. I talked to students in training and was well received. Although progress was slow, the 'Call Me Doctor' campaign became very well-known and we took advantage of offers from the dental defence organisations of free access to their legal teams, as indeed we did with the profession's parliamentary lobbyists.

The GDC was all too aware of the campaign and the growing pressure for change. The 'Doctor' issue was discussed in full council on 13 November 1990. A lively debate took place with the recommendation that appropriate changes to the Dentists Act should be sought. This recommendation was included with a list of other changes sought to the Dentists Act, but the 'Doctor' issue would not be sought in isolation as I had asked. The change we were calling for could be very many years away subject to the whims of both the Department of Health and of parliament itself; ever mindful, of course, that parliament had rejected a similar request from the GDC when the Dentists Act 1984 was put before them. Putting the 'Doctor' issue on the list of changes for when the Dentists Act 1984 was next opened was quite simply a delaying tactic on the part of the GDC. There was no strong will or commitment within the GDC to open up this controversial issue and seek change.

In December 1990, I wrote to the BDA suggesting that they might like to help things along by addressing BDA members as 'Doctor' and sending out all correspondence using the courtesy title. It was a long shot born of desperation, but to my immense pleasure and surprise, the idea was seized upon by the chair of the BDA Representative Board, Geoff Garnet, and after much discussion he got the motion passed at the meeting in January 1991. Of course, it was good practice to give individual members the choice, and of the 15,000 members polled there were only 400 who wanted, for one reason or another, to remain 'Mr/Mrs'. This bold and courageous BDA decision shocked the GDC and gave the 'Call Me Doctor' campaign a huge boost. Both the BDA and the GDPA were now fully onside. Other smaller groupings within the profession felt more secure in following suit.

I needed to get even closer to the establishment and, with a GDC election in the offing, I took my chance and was elected by the dentists of all England as one of only 14 elected members. The registrar Norman Davis and I had already exchanged many letters; we respected each other and eventually became good friends.

GDC members were very welcoming, but at the same time very reluctant to advance the 'Doctor' issue, saying we must wait until we have collected together all the changes that we wish to make to the Dentists Act 1984. 'Call Me Doctor' supporters were getting restless, but there was little I could do. The GDC members had closed their minds and their hearts to the issue.

In 1994, Margaret Seward was elected GDC president and prospects changed. Margaret had been editor of the *British Dental Journal* in a previous job, and from the letters to the editor she fully understood the pressures from within the profession. She determined to deal with the 'Doctor' issue early in her term as president. Interestingly, Margaret always travelled abroad as Dr Seward. Jenny Pinder, a fellow GDC elected member, told of being an examiner for the Royal College of Surgeons in Singapore. The examiners were all Mr/Mrs, while all the candidates were 'Doctor'.

I had long suspected and been advised that the amendment which the GDC was seeking to the Dentists Act was not the only way forward. Legal advice confirmed the view that amending the Dentists Act was not necessary before use by dentists of the title 'Doctor'. The GDC was slowly awakening to the fact that a slightly different interpretation could be put on Section 26 (2) of the Dentists Act 1984 and that they only needed to remove the prohibition to the title 'Doctor' from its rules and regulations ('The Red Book'). The Act could and would be amended later by parliament when the use of the courtesy title was commonplace. Waiting for the Act to be amended was quite simply an excuse for inactivity by a GDC unwilling to confront this controversial and divisive issue.

Following legal advice from the GDC solicitor and prompted by a letter I had written to the registrar in November 1994, the executive committee of the council were presented with the 'Doctor' issue as an agenda item in their spring 1995 meeting. A favourable response and a positive recommendation got through the committee stage and was considered by the full council at their May 1995 meeting. In preparing the

ground for this important GDC meeting, our arguments were all about the inevitability of the change and the benefits to patients; how, when our patients call us 'Doctor', it is because we are registered dental practitioners, and that our patients are comfortable with this and practitioners were no longer prepared to discourage this spontaneous use by our patients. We still had a difficult debate to win within the full GDC, as many appointed members – even some elected members and nearly all the lay members – were prepared to vote against this change.

I confess I did not do well during the debate. It seemed that minds were made up well in advance, with many lay members speaking vehemently against. In the event, the vote was lost 19 to 20, with two known pro supporters unable to attend. The public gallery was packed with 'Call Me Doctor' supporters. They were visibly shocked at the outcome, as indeed I was. Perhaps I should have done my numbers before the meeting, but it was too late now. What a setback. This vote caused a lot of upset and anger in the profession against the GDC, undoing much of what Margaret Seward was trying to do in making the GDC more approachable.

Margaret Seward was disappointed with the result and yet determined to see the job through. With customary skill, she managed to get the 'Doctor' issue back on the agenda for the next full council meeting six months later. She worked hard on all the lay members, including making a special visit to Scotland. I worked on the elected members. Pressure grew within the profession and the 'Call Me Doctor' supporters became more daring and more vocal.

The 'Doctor' proposal took the same route through the GDC committees for a second time in a year, ending up at the full council meeting on Tuesday, 14 November 1995. Again, 'Call Me Doctor' supporters filled the public gallery to overflowing. The vote recorded this time was 30 in favour and just 9 against. The public gallery at the GDC came alive as never before. Fortunately, my supporters poured out onto Wimpole Street to celebrate before they were asked to leave.

Immediately following the meeting, the GDC issued the following press release: 'The Council decided to remove from paragraph 54 of its ethical guidance contained in "Professional Conduct and Fitness to Practice" the words prohibiting use by dentists of the courtesy title "Doctor".'

This was all very low-key, but it enabled the registrar to issue a welcome letter sent out with the annual practising certificate (Fig. 1), which included the following: 'Effectively this allows dentists to use the courtesy title "Doctor" in the knowledge that they will not be liable to be charged by the General Dental Council with serious professional misconduct'.

Victory was ours.

The national press made much of it. The next day, I fielded many interviews reporting it as matter of fact. I treasure a cartoon which appeared on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph. Newsnight*, with Jeremy Paxman, wanted an interview with me. Knowing Paxman's aggressive style, I thought 'not a good idea', and I spent a very interesting day travelling between friends at Guys, the BDA, the GDC and Dental Protection, avoiding the researchers who were determined to catch up with me. It seems wherever they phoned I had just left, and eventually it was too late and the item was dropped from the programme. By and large, all the publicity was very positive and supportive. I treasure the mountain of letters that arrived over the next few days from 'Call Me Doctor' supporters.

By pure chance, following the GDC full council meeting on 14 November 1995, the president of the General Medical Council (GMC) was our guest at the traditional GDC dinner. He had no difficulty with our decision and opened his speech with: 'Hallo Doctors – I congratulate you on taking this progressive action.' Margaret Seward, in her memoir *Open Wide*, recalls being thrilled to receive a magnificent bouquet and the following message from myself and the 'Call Me Doctor' campaign: 'Grateful thanks to our very courageous President'.

Our victory had been gained from a divided GDC. There was much unhappiness from some, mostly lay members, about the outcome and the manner of gaining a positive outcome. To keep the peace, it was agreed that the council would delay using the courtesy title when addressing dentists until the row had died down. With success under my belt, I reluctantly went along with this. In the circumstances, this seemed a trivial concession, but in retrospect this proved to be a terrible mistake as there never was a suitable time to introduce the change. To the present day, the GDC refuses to acknowledge the title, replying to all dentists as Mr/Mrs. Worse still, the GDC took the stance of not condoning the use of the courtesy title, while still agreeing

Fig. 1 This is the letter sent out by the GDC registrar in November 1995 to all dentists on the dental register

that they would take no action against dentists who chose to use the title. The Dental Practice Board and other government agencies took their guidance from the GDC and refused to use the title when addressing dentists.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) didn't help when advising that patients could be confused by dentists using the courtesy title in their advertising, even when qualified by the description 'dentist' or 'dental surgeon'. In framing their response, the ASA quite naturally sought advice from the GDC, who produced their customary 'do not condone' response.

In January 1996, the matter was raised in parliament when MP Michael Stearn secured an adjournment debate on the use of the title 'Doctor'. Gerald Malone, the Minister for Health, responded and advised that the GDC

had 'merely amended its own ethical guidance to dentists. It is quite within its own legal powers to do that.'

Notwithstanding these setbacks and questions, custom and tradition in the use of the courtesy title 'Doctor' by dentists is becoming well established. Uptake of the courtesy title by established practitioners was slower than it might have been had the GDC had the courage of its convictions in supporting dentists. However, the uptake of the courtesy title by newly qualified young dentists, after a demanding course, is enthusiastic. Our patients do not appear to be confused and are accepting of the change.

We must wait a little longer for the legislative changes on this issue to catch up with the reality of 25 years of establishing custom and tradition.