EDITORIAL

Hard times and annular rings

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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.

Family anecdote has it that my paternal great grandfather when out walking in the countryside in the autumn would stop whenever he saw a fallen acorn and make a hole in the ground with his walking stick. Tapping the nut into the earthly cavity and covering it with soil he would proudly declare 'there, another oak.'

Trees come to mind just now because of their fascinating pattern of annular rings, the concentric circles that show on the cut surfaces of trunks. The variations in width of each ring for each year of growth shows how in some years it is strong and robust, others thin and weak. The coronavirus pandemic will doubtless show a remarkable, once in a generation, once in a century slowdown of human activity and certainly of economic growth. If we had human annular rings 2020 is destined to be as skinny as they come. And for dentistry these are hard times indeed.

As I anticipated in an earlier editorial, matters have been fast moving and on many fronts. The journal's strategy as outlined seems to be making sense and we are grateful to readers, authors and peer reviewers for their help, understanding and overwhelming written response to the pandemic. The number of submissions we have been receiving, and continue to receive, is unprecedented (an adjective in common currency in relation to coronavirus). These are in the form of letters and of papers and it is interesting to observe how they have followed a pattern even in this relatively short time. Initially there was a flurry of letters wishing to warn and inform readers of the potential consequences of the virus; mostly we declined these as they were broadly repetitious of material already in the public domain. These were followed by submissions about the detailed measures being brought into effect for the practice of dentistry in various countries; again we steered clear of these on the criterion of immediacy being better served by digital and social media. What is now emerging

is a fascinating, and I believe heartening, tapestry of the pragmatism, caring and creative thinking at which our profession is so good.

The results of this are evident in this issue and are being collated to provide what we hope is a balance in future issues too. So, for example, we have nine pages of letters in this issue which address matters from microbiology, testing, possible preventive measures, practical suggestions for barrier techniques, anxieties about training and education – and suggested solutions, emphasis on patient care and also on personal and colleague wellbeing. These are a selection and we have had to decline many others of a similar nature, for which we have apologised and explained to every author and correspondent individually. We hope that on

'For dentistry these are hard times indeed'

seeing the wide range covered each of those disappointed by not being published will feel that their points of view and pieces of advice have been included.

In line with a natural human progression from warning, panic, bewilderment to consideration, consolidation and problem solving, so submissions are now starting to focus on the 'how' and the experiences of the new situations in order to share knowledge and enhance professional approach and personal coping. This we are beginning to encompass in content in Upfront with stories of individual experiences; which again we will filter appropriately in the coming weeks.

Whatever field of practice we are in, and in whatever country, we are all wondering 'what next?' how is all this going to pan out? In this

issue we have a very helpful Opinion piece by Edmund Profitt, Chief Executive of the British Dental Industry Association reflecting on how a new normal might evolve. Of course no one can know and we will all have our directions and priorities but these thoughts provide a sound foundation for pondering and planning.

We have also brought together all *BDJ* coronavirus and COVID-19 content in a 'collection' available at <http://www.nature.com/collections/bdjcoronavirus> for ease of access and ongoing reference.

Among the submissions have been many, of what I think can best be described as speculative pieces about, for example, what might be the causes of the pandemic, how it might be related to known oral conditions

and *vice versa*. The *BDJ*'s reputation is in large part founded on its peer review and evidence-based content and, bluntly, it is just too early for research studies to have been effectively undertaken, reported and written up. These will emerge and go through our usual processes in due course as part of the considered, reflective advance of science.

Being personally reflective, I often wonder if I have ever walked under any of the trees resulting from my ancestor's planting. Whether or not, the response to the pandemic of everyone involved with the *BDJ* and with the profession does give me sincere hope that when we come to examine the annular rings of dentistry, 2020 may be narrow but there will yet be sturdy dental oaks. ■

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