SPECIAL FEATURE

Punishing pandemic encumbrance

By Sharif Islam, a semi-retired associate in a dental practice in London

I used to be a brown man. I really did. At least until about three hours ago when I took off my FFP3 mask after a gruelling crown preparation. The blood and colour still hasn't returned to replace the pallor. I love my melanin. I never felt any compulsion to have any tattoos, my skin already pigmented with the greatest colour in the world.

Heaven only knows what the poor patient must have thought – greeted by a guy in a Hazmat suit shouting unintelligibly through

while wearing a straitjacket too.

To say nothing of the heat. Somebody bless the inventor of air-conditioning because my body makes a lot of heat. This gown must have gone to the same academy of asphyxiation as the mask because it clearly also has an aversion to breathing.

Well, at least the patient gets to leave the room with a beautiful temporary crown. My nurse and I get to leave the room with hypoxia, dizziness and a shower in our own sweat. There's an oxygen tank in the

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a yard sale of Michelin rubber stuck to his mouth. It's no easy feat trying to carve a beautiful chamfer into a lower molar while tight straps are cutting off the oxygen to my brain.

Heaven only knows if the patient even heard me welcome them to their appointment. All the poor soul could see behind my visor were two eyeballs bulging in desperation and silently screaming 'help me'.

I can easily imagine my patient was lying there thinking 'there's a guy standing over me in what looks like a chemical weapon suit holding a giant needle. I'm pretty sure he's yelling something at me but I'm far more concerned about where that needle is going. I can't imagine any part of my head has the dimensions adequate to fit such a... Ow! And he's just stabbed me with it. That glint of satisfaction in the dentist's eyes must be a trick of the light...'

It wasn't satisfaction, believe me. I could barely see. I could talk well enough considering it sounded like I was gurgling underwater with a used gym sock in my mouth. And then there's the gown. Which doesn't fit properly. So, not only did I have trouble remembering my own name, let alone sculpt a tooth, I was trying to do it

building for medical emergencies so maybe I'll do what the pilots do after a hangover and take a quick hit.

All of this is because of the aerosol lingering in the air like an awkward relative at a wedding. One hour, 20 minutes: the duration of the fallow period probably dependent on how the Chief Dental Officer took her coffee that morning. An evidence base as reliable as the chocolate powder heart they dust on top of a Starbucks latte. COVID-19 is floating around somewhere laughing at us, bemused at why we care about a fallow time when it can stay aerosolised for up to 72 hours.

Don't get me wrong. Some dentists relish the elevated significance they feel wearing all this extra gear. They look on with envy at all those gallant hospital surgeons being clapped in the street and now they have their own shot at some glory. Good for them.

So, what on earth were we all doing before the pandemic? Other than wiping down surfaces and wearing masks and visors and gloves? And sterilising our equipment and discarding disposable items?

Exactly. What were we thinking? I mean, it's not like cross-infection protocols were ever in place to protect ourselves and the patients.

Well, maybe they didn't need to lock us out of our practices after all. Maybe all those poor dentists didn't need to lose their patients and their livelihoods. Maybe they didn't need to suffer the wrath of the man who resorted to reaching for a set of pliers...

We're back now, though. And busier and more lucrative than ever, and not because of any sneaky COVID surcharge. The backlog is finally cleared and patients are grateful to be seen, especially those that have been shielding for months and made us their first human contact since. And despite all the extra privations and procedures it is truly wonderful to see them all.

Complaining about PPE, AGPs and fallow periods makes for lively lunchtime whinging, and no doubt the Twitter feeds are busy with all our first-world problems. But we just have to get on with it and do the job. Because when all is said and done at the end of our gloves is a patient depending on us to make their lives a little more bearable. And in the current circumstances isn't that endeavour entirely worthy of a little encumbrance? ■