

Awakening

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

There has been a lot of discussion regarding sexism in dentistry recently, including being brought up at a recent FGDP webinar on gender equality. The reaction to this has been mixed with a section of the profession despairing over what they see as a 'woke' agenda being forced upon them. Others, myself included, are relieved that dentistry is turning the social conscience we show to patients upon ourselves.

Arguments against this internalised form of social justice mainly focus on the idea that the lived experiences of women who have experienced sexism don't count because they are not 'scientific'. Discounting lived experiences is a perilous thing to do. What happens when it's a minority that you identify with that's having its experiences dismissed as unimportant or non-existent? Just because you haven't experienced sexism (or racism/similar forms of discrimination) doesn't mean that it's not an issue for many. These issues raised should be heard, investigated, and if necessary, acted upon.

While sexism is important, it's also imperative to be aware that 'women' (or 'men' or 'whites' or 'BAME' or 'LGBT' etc) are not a homogenous group, but consist of individuals. It's important not to assume that because one person wants a specific outcome, everyone else in that group will. It's OK to be different. But it's also OK to be the same.

A further argument put forward by the naysayers is that dentistry acts as a meritocracy. This is all well and good, but the concept of a meritocracy is perpetrated by the historically patriarchal nature of leadership structure in dentistry.¹ 'Merit' is not seen as objective and is affected by all manner of bias, leading to men being selected over women at almost every stage of career development. We may have the

same finishing line, but the starting line is often very different.

Resolving this issue is complex, and solutions may be hard to come by. Many say that positive discrimination is something that they are against, but I would urge people to give this a second thought. As a white man, I'm already discriminated for. Why shouldn't someone who doesn't have that particular attribute have the same chance as I do?

This works both ways, of course. We should also be asking why men aren't encouraged into dental nursing or hygiene therapy as well. Could it be that these roles aren't traditionally considered to be 'proper' (ie male) jobs, and that nursing is thought to be lesser? These, and other societal issues, such as the lack of class diversity in dentistry, are different sides of the same coin.

Whatever your feelings are regarding intersectionality, it's undeniable that a white woman (for example) will experience life differently from a white man, who will experience it differently from an Indian man. Understanding these different life experiences is key to understanding our position in the profession and society. If someone's dismissing your experience because theirs is different, take a second to consider why.

Social justice matters even if your life is not affected by a lack of it.

Reference

1. Kline R. 'Merit' and diversity are not alternatives. *BMJ Leader* 2020. Available at <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjleader/2020/12/06/merit-and-diversity-are-not-alternatives-by-roger-kline/> (accessed February 2021).



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Four-thousand-year-old plaque reveals exotic tastes

A study published in the journal *PNAS* shows that the long-distance trade of exotic goods such as turmeric and bananas reached the Mediterranean around 3,700 years ago, much before it was originally thought.¹ The study of ancient proteins preserved in human plaque has also revealed that oriental elements and cooking oils were used in that era.

An international team of researchers examined the remains of 80 people from the digs of Megiddo and Tell Erani (Israel), sites which are included in an area considered an exchange path between Egypt, the Mediterranean and Asia 4,000 years ago.

Domingo C. Salazar of the University of Valencia said: 'We have been fortunate to find people who did not pay much attention to dental hygiene in the past, which today allows us to study their dental calculus.'

Reference

1. Scott A S, Power R C, Altmann-Wendling V et al. Evidence for long-distance trade in exotic foods and spices from South Asia to the Near East in the 2nd millennium BCE. *PNAS* 2021; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2014956117>.

