

# Lest we forget the students

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Sunlight burns away the last wisp of an early morning cirrus and lances through the blinds hiding the restorative department at the dental hospital. A shimmering beam of disinfectant mist reaches the headrest of an empty chair, bathing it in a warm spotlight. All the other chairs are silent sentries waiting in the dark. The handpieces are holstered and still. Burs are neatly stowed. Bibs are neatly folded. No one is here.

COVID-19 sent them all home.

Dental students were instead on the couch, sitting in front of laptops listening to lectures on Zoom while crunching their way through another tube of Pringles. Student diets were less pertinent than student debt, most of them wondering if this was really the type of education they were paying for. A few of them liked it, of course, knowing they could mute the computer and continue playing Grand Theft Auto on the big screen while pretending to rifle through their notes on cavity preparation.

They may be tentatively back on the clinics, gift-wrapped and suffocating in PPE, taking turns and maintaining social distance by using every other dental chair. It's not the same. Everything takes longer when you're sharing one AGP between five hungry students and waiting on the fallow time.

Many of them are frustrated, their hands twitching and itching to drill into something again. These guys were meant to be the next generation, the elite corps trained to some of the highest standards of operative dentistry anywhere in the known universe. Now their education is a festering boil of accumulating theory, rapidly engorging but unable to burst and splash into practice.

With all the uncertainty the aforementioned scenario brings, these kids need steady stewardship and clear direction. Now is not the time to dilute

or compromise their training. They and their professors may not have clear answers or know what the future may hold for fulfilling the syllabus, but they still have to complete the course.

So, what can we do to help amidst these restrictions? I mean us old timers who were lucky enough to benefit from uninterrupted training that was replete with the full spectrum of clinical experience. Perhaps, in the altruistic interest of securing the future of our profession, we can step up to the plate and pitch our combined wealth of experience, guiding and regaling these current undergraduates with nothing less than the reassurance that they'll be just fine.

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Possibly the biggest obstacle for any student in any subject, but arguably more so in an operative discipline impacting quality of life, is their self-confidence. That wonderfully elusive trait that enables a spirit of enterprise and accomplishment in the face of any and all adversity. One that marks the difference between hovering the drill over the enamel surface in a quivering wreck of hesitation, or plunging it full speed into a cesspool of caries and leaving not a microscopic morsel of disease at the amelodontal junction. Confidence is essential.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm still your basic drive-in horror show of rampant, individualistic capitalism, firmly believing that wealth creation should be unfettered, free and rewarded with generous tax-breaks. But while I may rail

against socialism, I also reject selfishness, daring to assert in this era of entitlement that personal liberty endows one with the civic obligation to help where one can.

And these dental students, unfairly condemned to an undeserved sentence of online lectures and forbidden fornication, could do with our help.

Maybe we can give them our time remotely, offering a welcome respite from boring online anatomy lectures or daytime TV. Maybe we can tell these students how all that anatomy and pharmacology is actually relevant in practice. Maybe we can share our mistakes in a useful session of *how-not-to*. And maybe we can give just the slightest indication that dentistry is about so much more than a set of teeth at the end of the drill. The person attached to those teeth matters too. Effective communication matters too. Work-life balance matters too.

The opportunity to give future dentists something more than they may have gleaned from a normal day at dental school

may cost us our time and energy, but most things that are worthwhile invariably do. Perhaps their education can become just a touch more enlightened in the midst of endless curtailment in an unwanted pandemic caused by an unseen microbe.

The pandemic has laid bare the grim reality of dental provision in this modern era. With so many people in desperate need of care and unable to find it, securing the future of dentistry seems not just urgent but also logical. All students of all ages are having to adapt to imposed constraints on their learning. But we cannot be indifferent to or complacent about their standard of education. It may cost humanity much of its treasure to prevail over COVID-19 and all its variants, but if we fail our students today we'll be facing a struggle in years to come that may prove costlier still. ■