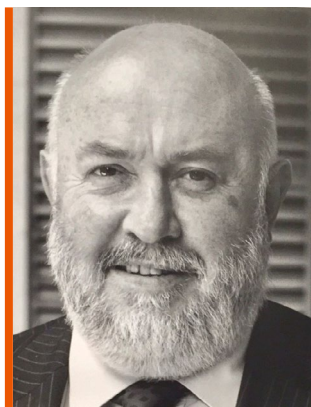


# Mick Armstrong – the politics and the science

By Stephen Hancocks OBE



Mick Armstrong has been a prominent figure in the dental political field, and especially at the British Dental Association (BDA), for a number of years. Here, Editor-in-Chief Stephen Hancocks catches up with Mick as he embarks on yet another new role, Chair of the BDA Health and Science Committee.

In the best possible way Mick is one of those characters of whom it can be said 'once seen never forgotten'. A gentle Yorkshire giant, literally and metaphorically, he has given many hours of his time and experience to the cause of dental politics and serving dental colleagues. I wanted to begin by finding out more about how he gravitated towards the non-clinical side of dentistry.

## If someone had told you that you would one day become the Chair of the PEC (the BDA's Principal Executive Committee – effectively the Board) would you have believed them?

The short answer is 'no'. But there came a moment when I looked around the room at the assembled candidates and evaluated whether there was one amongst them who I could see leading the BDA in a direction I could fully support.

Candidates I had assumed would stand and who I could support had decided not to for a variety of reasons and it was very apparent that the road ahead did seem to be a rather rocky one. Quite to my surprise, I was encouraged to stand by some of these colleagues not only with their support but also with a knowing smile and a wish of '...and good luck'. The rest, as they say, is history.

## At this stage you had been in dental politics for a while. How did you first get involved?

Like many fresh faced, callow young associates, I remember being dragged to a Local Dental Committee (LDC) meeting. It was in 1992 to discuss the fallout of the 7% fee cut. The anger, passion and deep knowledge of the NHS system displayed by some colleagues impressed me enormously. From then on I attended regularly, was eventually elected to the Committee and, guided by local luminaries including Eric Willings and John Milne, was elected chair in 1998. LDCs are the cornerstone of our profession and the experience and expertise within them is of huge value. I have been immensely fortunate to have been mentored and nurtured by the very best throughout my career. I am extremely

grateful and more than a little humbled that they chose to invest their time in me.

I was then elected to the [then] BDA Representative Body representing Yorkshire Branch where I began to learn from national luminaries. I am particularly grateful to Susie Sanderson, Judith Husband, John Renshaw, Stuart Johnstone, again John Milne and many, many others who kept me straight, demonstrated the wider view and instilled in me the art of dental politicking. There is no real substitute for listening and taking note from those who have gone before and time spent with learned colleagues is of unparalleled value in my opinion.

## Your time as the immediate past Chair of the PEC included some very challenging circumstances. Which troubled you the most?

Without doubt the biggest issue was the existential crisis precipitated by the BDA membership restructure. Undoubtedly, it was a significant threat to the Association's financial viability and had seriously affected the confidence of members. The ensuing redundancies were extremely painful to implement but sadly unavoidable. It took a long time to tweak the new structure to rebuild the finances and restore confidence but I'm pleased to say that with the excellent staff led by Peter Ward before his retirement, Martin Woodrow and Richard Shilling, we are now in a position where even the COVID pandemic has been survivable.

Then of course there was the appointment of Bill Moyes as Chair of the GDC.

Without a shadow of doubt the GDC needed a massive overhaul, but it soon became clear that it would be the profession that would pay the price. To find it necessary to take our regulator to the High Court is quite a decision. I'm proud the PEC took that decision and I'm even more pleased we were found to be justified in doing so. I believe that was a watershed moment for the BDA and the whole profession. We had demonstrated the will to go as far as necessary to defend the interests of all dentists and our colleagues. ▶▶

### « What are you most proud of that you helped bring about or influence during your time as Chair?

I'm pleased that the PEC functions in an entirely democratic manner, and elections to it always have a healthy number of diverse candidates. I'm immensely proud of BDA Indemnity, which I believe is a truly excellent product. It is having a very positive and growing effect in an indemnity market which had become a very complex law unto itself. The GDC is heading in the right direction, albeit at a snail-like pace, and our response to the COVID pandemic has been immense. The BDA has demonstrated its competence, resilience and flexibility in supporting members, not only in terms of their practising lives but also with their health and wellbeing.

I was also always pleasantly astonished at the high regard in which the BDA and the *BDJ* are held internationally. The Association's processes, research and general information are widely referred to and utilised by many other countries. The BDA opinion is always valued. Accepting such praise at international conferences and meetings is humbling, but so very welcome as an antidote to those who criticise our efforts at home.

### How did you manage integrating your PEC and BDA duties around practising life in your general dental practice? Were the team and your patients understanding?

It was managed with the help of two excellent PAs working in tandem! Alison Magee at the BDA and Becki Noble at the practice. Only on very rare occasions did I end up in the wrong place preparing to wield the probe rather than the pen and *vice versa*. Seriously, it is very difficult to practise two or three days and then travel and chair for another two or three, but it is also really helpful to gain direct insight into understanding the pain and pleasure that dentists endure as a result of decisions taken on regulation and contracts. My team were incredibly supportive and for the most part so too were my patients, although some were never short of advice on how a trade union should conduct its business ... I am based in Castleford after all!

### Everything has changed due to the pandemic since your period of office ended. Do you feel that that happened 'just in time' or would you like to be in the thick of it still?

Genuinely, I'm never happier than when I'm in the thick of it, in fact I rather miss the cut and thrust. The BDA face almost constant daily challenges from the NHS, GDC, other regulatory bodies, the economy, the media and occasionally we get little things like Brexit and COVID superimposed on top, just to make our days a bit more complicated and little bit longer. I'm delighted that Eddie Crouch has been elected to succeed me as Chair and I know he will continue to make the BDA even better still and in a similar vein. It's a deserved reward for all his years of unstinting efforts on behalf of colleagues.

### Would you encourage newly qualified colleagues to get involved in dental politics and BDA Sections/Branches?

Of course. Sharing one's problems, challenges and successes with like-minded colleagues has been hugely beneficial to me and perhaps it is something that's been a bit lost as people turn to social media. It's not just BDA events and meetings, it's the LDCs as well, although very often you will see the same faces. Everyone is always very welcome and you will find quite quickly someone who has been through it all before.

### This rather makes it sound as if you have left dental politics but you are still a member of PEC and have recently been elected as Chair of the Health and Science Committee (HSC). Is this following in the current trend of 'politics following the science' and how do you see the profession progressing in the near future?

My, that's a clever segue Stephen. Perhaps one side effect of the pandemic is that it has shown us what a world without dentistry looks like. Even now the reduced capacity is having an effect on oral health. Access is difficult but frankly it was this way for up to 50% of the population long before the pandemic. Our response must be to build back better and fairer, and in this we must be guided by the science.

Dentistry is science and evidence-based and the HSC plays a vital part in contributing to and distilling evidence into useable information for our members and the public. We are fortunate to have access to internationally respected colleagues. Hopefully, the evidence is always clear cut but when it is complex, disputed and emerging then we must provide the best guidance we can through 'considered judgements' which can sometimes be an uncomfortable mix of politics, science and instinct. We must make our arguments based on our knowledge and experience.

I often hear 'when can we get back to normal?' I believe this warrants a closer look. Do we really want to return to 40 patients a day, 40,000 children's GAs a year or where DIY dentistry is the only option for huge swathes of the population? I suggest we should not.

So I look forward to my new role, using the science to promote prevention, improved oral health for all and to strongly reinforce the pivotal role dentistry has in reducing inequalities... if it is well supported!

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### Aside from the effects of the pandemic, as far as that is possible to consider, how do you spend the time that was previously taken up with your PEC role?

Well, my family are welcoming me back with mixed blessing as I start to take over the house again. The dust sheets and tarpaulins are coming off the small collection of HGVs and classic cars I have and the spanners and gas torch will be picked up from where I left them... and I have a bit of art to collect and display.

I had a fantastic time as Chair: the most fulfilling of my career by far. I'm immensely proud of the BDA and I know it will continue to go from strength to strength. I'd just like to say thank you to all my friends and colleagues for putting their trust in me and thank you to the BDA staff for their unwavering excellence and support.

Finally, to all colleagues of all ages I'd like to say: get interested, keep interested, get involved and stand for what you believe in and want to achieve. ■