

professionalism and dedication to what matters. Belonging to the BDA gives one support, opportunities for friendship and mutual understanding. It offers guidance when things are rough, and as Peter Ward once said to me, the letters BDA run through my core like 'Blackpool' runs through a stick of rock. And the BDA can offer all the things it offers because of the wonderful and consummately professional staff. They are

our backbone and we owe them so much. If we were together tonight in reality, rather than virtually, I would ask you to offer the staff a round of applause. But I am sure you are joining me in applauding them in your hearts and minds.

So thank you. Thank you for electing me. But most of all thank you for being part of a profession of which we should all be SO proud. My rallying cry is to go and shout

about it. Dentistry must STOP hiding its very considerable light, which is so important to the public, under a bushel of modesty. We must tell people what we do, why we do it and why it matters. The public know us and they WILL support us if we stand up for the appreciation dentistry deserves.

Ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to be your President. ■

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Valedictory speech

Russ Ladwa
BDA President 2020/21

The last few months have been so challenging as we have learnt to live and work with the ever-changing parameters of the pandemic, in such an uncertain world. Normally, the BDA President would have travelled nationally and abroad, meeting members, officers and colleagues to fly the flag for the association, the profession and the United Kingdom. I was unable to do any of this. However, I am very philosophical that, like most of us, I have kept healthy and I am here. My thoughts go to all the families we know who have lost loved ones due directly or indirectly to the COVID-19 virus.

I sincerely wish my successor a much more normal term. I know that Professor Liz Kay will take the BDA to greater heights with all her knowledge, skills and experience. When others may be comfortable to remain quiet, I know she will speak up, especially for those that cannot speak for themselves.

My recent and respected predecessors have also set a very high bar for me to attain, all continuing to serve both the BDA and the profession at large, in various capacities, both at home and abroad. I hope I will have their energy and enthusiasm to be able to follow their grand examples.

The first and total lockdown last year was a good time for reflection for all of us in trying to sort what was really important and setting our priorities in life and work. The real test has been how much of that we have maintained and retained in these critical times.

On 8 June last year, at very short notice, my daughter and I together with so many other colleagues nationwide returned to our clinical duties, to provide as full and as comprehensive a service to our patients as possible, despite all the problems with PPE, fallow times etc... All the clinicians who returned to work and every one of their supporting teams were the unsung heroes of the dental profession, unbeaten by the pandemic. On behalf of the BDA, I would like to pay tribute to all of them.



'I remain sincerely hopeful that we will find ways to cope with the pandemic and continue to serve our communities well for a long time to come, in a manner that we would always be proud of.'

The BDA staff, well led by Martin Woodrow, also quickly adapted to remote working and spent long hours to solidly support members' services and answer their constant queries. My sincere and heartfelt congratulations and thanks on behalf of all the members and all officers of the BDA.

I was able to attend many of the online meetings of the PEC, astutely led by Eddie Crouch, and various other committees, and observe at close hand the dedication and zeal of all the elected officials at all levels in finding innovative solutions to often tricky and seemingly insurmountable problems.

My one regret is that I was unable to action my bridge building and communication skills with diplomacy and tact to work closer with the CDO. The General Dental Services are still mired by a dire contract, which the pandemic has sharply focused on, causing an all-time low morale in practitioners and their teams. At times, it seems as if nobody wants to listen, let alone understand. Quick fixes to make things look better will not work any longer and the system of NHS dentistry faces a

collapse unless politicians get a grasp of the real and core reasons why. I do not believe that there is a shortage of dentists, but there is certainly a shortage of dentists willing to work for the NHS. They simply need to ask WHY? To my mind, the state needs to make a real investment and commitment to NHS dentistry to make it work and have a significant and vital role in wider healthcare. It is often an afterthought and has become a 'Cinderella' of healthcare.

As strong as the BDA is, with its long and illustrious history, in this ever-changing world, we need strong allies to back us

up, in speaking to the government and regulatory bodies. I perceive the newly-born College of General Dentistry as a strong and complementary partner in the future, whose voice will carry additional weight even with the general public, when it ultimately attains Royal College status. We already have experience of co-operating and collaborating with the College's founding body, the FGDP(UK), which we should continue and build on, for the sake of the profession and patient care. This relationship has to be nurtured.

I am proud and pleased to say that the other body, apart from the FGDP(UK), that we have worked well with in the last year is the Office of the CDO, in our ongoing work regarding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) matters, a subject close to my heart. It is ironical that history thrust to the fore all these issues of racism and under-representation during my term. We started by formally inviting and listening to some groups and their concerns. We learnt a great deal and then went on to carry out a wide-ranging survey of all dentists (not just members) to find out how to reflect our structures and aims to the make-up of our diverse membership.

We also kept an eye on what other institutions were finding and doing so that we could continuously monitor and modify our approach as necessary with ongoing external changes. Our priority was to put

our own house in order first. Towards this, the PEC had the foresight to create an EDI committee at the outset. This committee has produced a prodigious amount of work, from surveys and research to guidance on language to regular blogs. I am very grateful indeed to all the team for driving this project. The latest of these supporting projects are online training modules for all members and their teams (with CPD as an incentive) but also suitable for the staff.

For EDI issues to be successful, they have to be accepted and owned by the whole of the BDA from top to bottom and right across all the branches and sections. I see this as a long-term mission to win people's minds and hearts, so it will take time and evolve. I am very proud to have had the opportunity to be involved during my term and am very content with the huge progress we are making. I pledge to be available to the association to help and support EDI issues with all my experience and passion.

I have a personal message for all students, those in training and all those who have just begun their careers. I very much regret that I was not able to interact with you all as much as I had hoped. However, I know deep down and from what I observe around me that all of you are much brighter, stronger and adaptable than generally believed. Despite the disruption and dilution of your training, your collective resilience will carry you through and the BDA and its senior

members will always be there to support you.

The pandemic has highlighted the issue of trust. While there were some rays of hope, the GDC tripped up by paying private investigators for under-guise operations and the powers responsible missed the timely opportunity to appoint a dentist as the new Chair. While the BDA as our trade union always fights for better conditions and support from the state, and better understanding and flexibility from the regulatory bodies, we as individuals and as a body must never contemplate or do anything that will undermine that favourable but fragile trust that exists between the profession and the public. If this trust is lost, we are at risk of losing everything.

I remain sincerely hopeful that we will find ways to cope with the pandemic and continue to serve our communities well for a long time to come, in a manner that we would always be proud of. We must remain positive always, no matter how dark it may seem at times.

I greatly value the friendship and fellowship all of you at the BDA have given me. On the home front, my wife Taru and daughters Meera and Radhika always ensured that I maintained all round good health to allow me to continue all my duties. I am always indebted to all my friends and colleagues for their solid support and all my patients, for their trust and loyalty. ■

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