

Valedictory address

Elizabeth Kay MBE
BDA President 2021/23

It is hard for me to believe that I am already coming to the end of the wonderful experience of being President of the British Dental Association. It honestly seems only a moment ago that, in the middle of lockdown, I sat in front of a little screen in my office, while my partner put the presidential jewel around my neck! And yet, on the other hand, lockdown...what a different world that was, and how far away that seems. But becoming President seems to me to be so recent and yet it was over 18 months ago, because I have had the very, very great fortune of having had a slightly longer than usual term as President, because of course COVID-19 had scrambled all the usual arrangements and the BDA's annual cycle of events. But now, things are back on track...at least in some ways.

But let us just for a moment cast our minds back to those times of the severe lockdowns, which now seem like a different life, a different world. Those months of fear, those months/years even of such difficult times for the dental profession, who nevertheless battled on regardless, and found ways to care for their patients, despite the risks, and despite the hideous working conditions, and fallow times. If only heroism such as that (and heroism is genuinely what I believe it was) were properly recognised, and properly rewarded. I believe that our profession, which I am so proud to be part of, was then, and is now, truly magnificent.

And of course the dratted pandemic pretty much spoilt my predecessor's time as President, which was so, so sad...for us, and for him, because far fewer people had the chance to listen to, and talk to, the lovely Russ Ladwa than should have been the case. COVID, which frightened us all; COVID which dominated our world; and COVID, which has, in fact, changed our lives irrevocably, and forever.

We can now, as a result of the boom in technology resultant from the pandemic, all attend meetings, see friends and give lectures without stirring from our settees and without traipsing about the country,

or in some people's cases, the world, without burning masses of fossil fuels in the process, without braving the weather outside. To some, that release has been a joy. To others, it has been torture. There are still people who say that business cannot be done properly without actually being in the same room as others. There are others who argue that organisations can function perfectly well and with huge benefits in cost savings, without ever meeting physically. It is an ongoing debate. I personally think the truth lies somewhere in between. Most business can perfectly adequately be conducted via Teams or Zoom or whatever your preferred platform is. But for some things, I think you do need



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to catch the subtleties of human behaviour in front of you in order to truly understand what is being communicated. But most importantly, and particularly for the BDA, what was lost during the pandemic was the camaraderie and comfort that an organisation that really understands its members and whose members really understand each other, can give to an individual. And those elements of what the BDA does must remain.

The BDA does face some challenges. Not least the dental contract, but also the apparent view among younger cohorts that they do not need a professional organisation. During my travels as President, I have learned that we are not alone in facing the difficulties posed by falling membership and poor attendance at face-to-face meetings. It seems that it is the same for dental associations across the globe. And I find this sad. We need each other. We need a professional association. In these very, very

turbulent times, we have probably never needed these things more.

Because the world is a very uncertain place. We do not know what is going to happen. I mean, who would ever have predicted that there would be a worldwide infectious disease that would kill millions and change the way we live, forever. Who would ever have predicted that we would see a war in Europe in the twenty-first century. And I think the precariousness and uncertainty in today's world teaches a very profound lesson. And it is this. (And I think this might be particularly important to dental students and younger dentists). Never, ever let yourselves be limited by expectations...your own, or other people's.

When I was a student, if you had said to one of my lecturers, that Liz Kay would become a Professor, and a Dean of a dental school, or, most ridiculously of all, the President of the BDA, they would have laughed in your face...and yet all these marvellous and completely unexpected things have come to pass! Amazing. I am a classic example of what John Lennon said...that 'life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.' So, it has all been utterly amazing to me...and I guess to others! But when you think that when I was a student there were no, and I mean NO female dental professors, it proves that the most unexpected and the most profound changes do happen. The world does move on.

So, as I said to the students at Christmas – difficulties and stress are motivators if you don't let them overwhelm you. And as difficult as things sometimes are, stress enables you to do, to cope, and sometimes to achieve things that

« you never thought possible. Being part of this profession is, undoubtedly sometimes, perhaps often, stressful. But you are stressed because you are part of the best, the most amazing profession. And here I am going to repeat what I have said at the many Branch and Section meetings I have attended during my time as President, and which I said in my inaugural speech, which I hope you will forgive, but I think it bears repetition. When you really think about it, you will recognise that you are part of a profession, the like of which there is no other. There is no other career, no other workplace, no other area of professional practice which requires a set of skills such as yours. Skills which are demanding, eclectic, deeply practical yet requiring intellect, artistry, and profound knowledge. Only dentistry requires all those things. And that, I hope,

is what my presidency has been about... celebration. Celebration of what we do, recognition of what we are: a fantastically skilled profession, whose central tenet is others' wellbeing, and adding quality to people's lives. We are as good, as important as any other professional group and we have to stop being humble. I don't think we remind people of the service we give to the population, or how important we are to them often enough. We do not point out our immense professionalism, our resilience and our enormous skill set often enough. I think it is high time we did that, and that dentistry started to demand the admiration and respect it so fully and so rightly deserves.

So just before I finish, let me thank again, from the bottom of my heart, those who nominated me, those who elected me and bestowed this huge honour on me. And

I want to thank everyone that I have met over the last 18 months for the wonderful hospitality and kindness I have been shown by everyone, and I'd like to thank the brilliant BDA staff for all they do for us all, and most particularly dear Alison Magee, who has looked after me so utterly brilliantly. Thank you all so, so much.

And now I will really finish by saying that the BDA represents all the qualities I have talked about. Resilience under pressure, 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.

I have never been, and would never wish to be, without it.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you all, for everything. ■

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