Summary of: Educational support for the dental workforce: a review of the first five years of Retaining and Returning Advisers in England

J. Davies-Slowik,¹ V. Firmstone² and J. Frame³

FULL PAPER DETAILS

¹Associate Dental Dean Performance Development, NHS West Midlands, St Chad's Court, 213 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B16 9RG; ²Research Fellow, ³Emeritus Professor, Centre for Research in Medical and Dental Education, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT
Correspondence to: Dr Jane Davies-Slowik
Email: jane.davies-slowik@westmidlands.nhs.uk
Tel: +44 (0)121 695 2589

Online article number E6

Refereed Paper – Accepted 17 June 2010

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2011.197

^aBritish Dental Journal 2011; 210: E6

Introduction Retaining and Returning Advisers (RRAs) were appointed to postgraduate dental deaneries in England in 2002 as part of the Government's strategy to retain the dental workforce and support return to practice following a career break. The study aimed to review RRAs' activities and consider the overall success of the RRA initiative five years from inception (2007). **Design and methods** A case study design, conducted in three phases, drawing on qualitative data. In Phase 1, semi-structured interviews were held with all RRAs in England (n = 12). Phase 2 involved an electronic survey of all 12 postgraduate dental deans in England (n = 10). In Phase 3, analysis was undertaken and a final report prepared. **Results** RRAs have been flexible in responding to the changing policy context, and devolved funding for the role to the local, deanery level. They have adapted to support more diverse target groups including those seeking vocational training equivalence and underperforming dentists. Future priorities were envisaged to be associated with primary care trusts' commissioning and quality assurance responsibilities, and supporting all members of the dental team. **Conclusion** RRAs have become well-established in deaneries and have made a successful contribution to addressing workforce and educational needs for a diverse group of practitioners.

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

This paper highlights the benefits that can follow when a sensible solution to an identified need is recommended and that recommendation is acted upon and subsequently evaluated. The government funding and training initially provided for Retaining and Returning Advisers (RRAs) in the first three years following their introduction to the postgraduate dental deaneries undoubtedly contributed hugely to their successful integration into the deanery teams. That the RRA role was truly needed can be seen in the fact that all the deaneries retained their RRAs when central government funding ceased after three years and responsibility for the financial arrangements devolved to local deanery budgets.

The results of this study show that RRAs have proved to be flexible and have adapted well to changing circumstances and local needs. From an initial focus on dentists returning to practice following a career break, after five years

RRAs' roles had expanded to include groups such as dentists who trained overseas, those seeking equivalence to vocational training, dental care professionals (DCPs) and poorly performing dentists. This process of role expansion appears to have evolved naturally as policies and workforce issues have changed over time – another indication that the introduction of RRAs was based on a correctly identified need.

As the authors point out, this history of flexibility puts RRAs in a strong position to respond to future changes in workforce, policy and educational priorities. In her commentary on this paper (right), Dame Margaret Seward, the author of the original report recommending the introduction of RRAs, identifies the next year or two as an ideal opportunity to once again revisit the contribution of RRAs to postgraduate dental education. It is clear that RRAs today do much more than simply helping to 'retain and return', and with the introduction

of revalidation, the extended roles of DCPs and the prospect of yet another new commissioning structure for primary care dentistry on the horizon, they have the potential to play a key role in postgraduate dental education for the foreseeable future.

The full paper can be accessed from the *BDJ* website (www.bdj.co.uk), under 'Research' in the table of contents for Volume 210 issue 5.

Rowena Milan
Managing Editor

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2011.173

TO ACCESS THE BDJ WEBSITE TO READ THE FULL PAPER:

- BDA Members should go to www.bda.org.
- Click the 'login' button on the right-hand side and enter your BDA login details.
- Once you have logged in click the 'BDJ' tab to transfer to the BDJ website with full access.

IF YOUR LOGIN DETAILS DO NOT WORK:

- Get a password reminder: go to www.bda.org, click the login button on the right-hand side and then click the forgotten password link.
- Use a recommended browser: we recommend Microsoft Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox.
- Ensure that the security settings on your browser are set to recommended levels.

IF YOU HAVE NOT YET SIGNED UP TO USE THE BDA WEBSITE:

- Go to www.bda.org/getstarted for information on how to start using the BDA website.

IN BRIEF

- Retaining and Returning Advisers (RRAs) have become well-established dental educators in postgraduate dental deaneries across England.
- RRAs provide advice and educational support for a range of dental practitioners.
- RRAs are well-placed to respond to future workforce and educational priorities.

COMMENTARY

Fortunately one of the recommendations contained in the report *Better opportunities for women dentists* advised not only on appointing a Retaining and Returning Adviser (RRA) for one day each week based in each postgraduate deanery in England but also stipulated that an evaluation of their effectiveness should be planned in advance using agreed protocols to achieve consistency across deaneries. In implementing the recommendation, the Department of Health provided funding for the first three years and also organised training sessions for the advisers, an invaluable support mechanism for the new member of the postgraduate deanery team.

The authors in this paper review the RRAs' activities over the five-year period from the inception of the initiative in 2002. After the first 12 months of operation a formative evaluation was completed and I believe the outcome of the research was enhanced by the researchers, who engaged with the RRAs at the outset to explain the methodology of the study and encourage enthusiasm for the project. The definitive review of the first five years reported here took place in 2006/07 using a three-phase research design: semi-structured interviews with all RRAs, an electronic survey with all 12 postgraduate dental deans and analysis of the resulting qualitative data.

The results clearly show that the role of the RRA was not confined to the original concept of dealing with dentists on career breaks and return

to work initiatives, but had evolved to include poor performers, those seeking VT equivalence, dental care professionals and overseas dentists. Reassuringly, despite the intervening changes in strategic policy, the RRAs, most of whom had been in post since inception, had carved out a unique dental educator role in each deanery and it became clear that if they had not existed they would have to have been invented.

So to the future. Diversity in their job will continue and they are well placed to assist with the challenge of revalidation. In 2011/2012 it will be 10 years since the introduction of the RRA. I believe it is an ideal opportunity to revisit their educational contribution to the expanding dental workforce and so ensure that continuity of data is not lost.

M. Seward DBE
Chief Dental Officer Emerita

AUTHOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**1. Why did you undertake this research?**

Aimed at reviewing the role of the Retaining and Returning Advisers (RRAs), this research was undertaken to investigate the overall success of the RRA initiative and consider its likely future. The study was conducted five years on from the launch of RRA posts in all English postgraduate dental deaneries, and four years after the authors evaluated the initiative for the Department of Health.

In the intervening years, considerable change had taken place for RRAs: the Department of Health's central funding for the role had finished, a new dental contract had been implemented, bringing with it new responsibilities for PCTs in dental commissioning and quality assurance, and concerns about the supply of the dental workforce had abated. Such change generated our research questions: how had these changes affected the education and support activities provided by RRAs? Had the RRA role been a success? And what were their future priorities?

2. What would you like to do next in this area to follow on from this work?

Our priority for future research will be to focus on one specific target group for the RRAs: poor performers, ie dental professionals who have been identified as underperforming in their workplace, and who absorb considerable educational resources from postgraduate deaneries, often over many months. Our research would aim to understand 'what works' and 'what doesn't' for underperforming practitioners, in the hope of better understanding how deaneries can make timely and effective educational intervention.