

Hacks, hackers and hacking

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I hope that it will not come as a surprise to readers to learn that the *BDJ* has never been involved in phone hacking and furthermore, as far as I am concerned, never will be. I know that at the outset it hardly seems relevant even to mention it, since the journal is quite a different animal to those publications currently under such intense media, political and legal scrutiny. But bear with me for a while as we think this through.

It seems to me that the media frenzy and the political icing on the cake of discomfort all has the feel of 'me thinks the lady protests too much'. For the rest of us humble, un-hacked (as far as we know) individuals there is an element of standing around in the playground watching as the main protagonists dance round each other in the manner of dizzy boxers, not quite knowing whether to hit anyone at all, and if so, then who and how hard.

But are we really surprised by this? Did we really trust journalists to be whiter than white? And isn't there also a note of hypocrisy here too? *The News of the World* was the best selling newspaper in the country, so someone was buying it and more than subconsciously buying into the prurience of the detail and by association, the techniques and methods by which the information was gathered. Any 'shock-horror' here is in the pretence that we did not know that journalists use underhand practices to dig up stories.

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

Once the immediacy of the details has passed the longer term likelihood for the press, based no doubt on recommendations from the inquiries currently being set up, will be greater restriction on activity, more regulation, increased 'safeguards' for the public and continued government monitoring. So, stop me if any of this sounds familiar to us in what used to be the dental profession, now downgraded as I repeatedly point out because we are no longer self-governing. It should be familiar because it is exactly what has happened to us, and to a lesser extent to the medics thanks to the misdemeanours of one man, not Rupert Murdoch but Harold Shipman.

The comparison becomes available because of underlying bad practice, anti-social behaviour and illegal acts causing distress to those directly involved and disquiet to the wider community as to how such occurrences were allowed to happen. It is not surprising therefore that the political remedy, based on the cry of 'what are *they* going to do about it?' is to crack down with increased scrutiny in the manner outlined above. Of course the unfortunate aspect about both instances is

that it is innocent people who potentially, or actually, become disadvantaged. In the case of restrictions on press activity we may all be slightly better protected in some ways but it might also mean that the investigative journalism that has uncovered political shenanigans in particular, Watergate being perhaps the most famous example, may be seriously constrained to the point of impotence. In our case, the same process of fear of consequences has led to the current hair-tearing situation in which we find ourselves weighed down with excessive regulation as evidenced by HTM 01-05, the Care Quality Commission and the host of other red taped intrusions.

The agony is that these measures invariably seem superficially very worthy and reasonable while beneath the veneer the consequences are, at least in the meantime, deflected. For our patients and ourselves this continuing additional pressure means that dental care takes more time and is inevitably more expensive to provide. This is a reflection of either time taken from the clinician or the need to delegate tasks to other team members, more of whom need to be employed in order to maintain and monitor the complex weave of regulation, implementation and accountability. None of this has to necessarily mean disadvantage as long as everyone accepts that the trade-off between nominally increased quality and safety is, amongst other factors, cost. In the case of newspapers we choose to pay the cover price, or not, according to the market, as indeed we do with private treatment. In the case of government funded dental care the squeeze remains, as successive attempts at crafting new, new new and newer contracts continues to graphically illustrate with attendant exhausting consequences.

At the heart of the matter is our old friend, to whom we often seem to have had to return in these columns in recent times: trust. If we trusted journalists, and if they demonstrated that the trust was well placed then little if any of this sorry business would have come to pass. However, on the positive side we do know that our patients trust us and as long as we continue to earn that trust the surrounding paraphernalia of interference can remain an irritation and not an impediment. Whilst it might be rather exciting, naughtily intriguing and distinctly tempting to wonder what we would learn from hacking into the phones of say, the Department of Health, various Chief Dental Officers and the GDC, overall I close where I began by assuring you that your trust in the integrity of the *BDJ* is very well placed.

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