

Devoid of dentistry

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IN BRIEF

- A nostalgic look back at dentistry in a bygone age.
- Current dental curricula have been scaled down.
- Urges the dental community to tie a tourniquet around the haemorrhage of dental curricula and reverse course.

Dental curricula in UK dental schools are seemingly excising ever more skills as each generation of students is trained. This has implications for the quality of education held by the latest dental graduates, and furthermore potentially for the standard of care that their patients may receive. This leaves us today somewhat nostalgic for a bygone era when dental undergraduate education was replete with a fuller repertoire.

A crimson red Ford Capri blazes past with an embedded cassette tape blaring out Duran Duran's *Wild Boys* for all but a brief moment before fading away into the distance. A lone police officer walking his beat (remember those?) raises an eyebrow as he walks along an avenue where several of the houses have occupants huddled around a television watching *Super Gran* and *Fraggle Rock*, surrounded by the remains of newspapers decrying the battle of words between Margaret Thatcher and Arthur Scargill. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has just finished horse riding in the grounds of Windsor with President Reagan, Ian Rush has scored another goal for Liverpool, *The A-Team* has made yet another plan come together and Luke Skywalker has defeated Darth Vader on a cinema screen somewhere for the millionth time.

These were the 1980s. Halcyon days. For myself they are revered today as a time of mythical dentistry, when a dental student would graduate from a dental school with a fabled skill-set which placed him or her in the upper echelons of human ability. A time when, all told, that graduate could perform such feats as bending orthodontic wire with their tongue while levitated in a

state of transcendental meditation; when they could wax up a 28 unit metal bridge framework using just an old candle and a hot spoon while humming the opening riff to *Sweet Child O' Mine* by Guns and Roses; when they could place a dental restoration under the NHS and actually be paid for it. Isn't mythology wonderful?

It seems though, that as we move further ahead in time, and as the art and science of dentistry becomes more sophisticated and effective than ever before in Man's long climb from the swamp to the stars, the content of dentistry on the undergraduate curriculum is being slowly siphoned off to save time, money and resources. And as we move further ahead, it therefore seems that those dentists that came before us had a more replete experience, wrought and skilled in a vast variety of disciplines that would seem alien to graduates of today. My own principals described how, just a quarter century ago in that wonderful decade of optimism and glamour, they would spend hours on a clinic learning to press gold leaf into a cavity, carve anatomy into their amalgams, and thereafter polish them with a paste of pumice and zinc oxide eugenol. They would have to manufacture all their own prosthetic restorations, from crowns to dentures, from the impression stage to the polishing of the gold or acrylic. Ask the modern dental graduate to spell any of that, let alone understand it, and they look at you dumbfounded.

Today, a dental student may qualify without, for example, ever having

attempted or completed a root canal treatment. They may read about it, and understand the principles of it, but dentistry is a practical science and no amount of reading will substitute the operative experience. They may leave the confines of their dental hospital behind without ever having imbibed the wondrous gratification of waxing up a full denture or layering porcelain powder onto a crown. They may enter the dental profession as legitimate clinicians, but without the confidence to cannulate a forearm for intravenous sedation, or the education to extract an embedded wisdom tooth.

Now the critics will say that this is all irrelevant. That today resources do not need to be invested in teaching those aspects of dentistry which practitioners refer out to specialists anyway; that efforts should be focused on the core elements and nothing more; and that practitioners can undertake those desired or missing disciplines with postgraduate education at their own convenience and expense. As usual, the critics are wrong. No practitioner should feel compelled to perform those treatments for which they do not feel adequately experienced, trained or confident. But no practitioner that hopes to inspire, lead and care for their patients can substitute actual experience with mere conjecture. Graduating without the feel of a file reaming a root canal, or without a generous helping of the laboratory skills that dental technicians have, will not empower any dentist to effectively

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Refereed Paper
Accepted 4 January 2012
DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2012.136
©British Dental Journal 2012; 212: 163-164

communicate treatment options to their patients, nor enable them to understand the technical intricacies of the work they undertake.

Even though I'm a graduate of the last decade (a decade ago in fact), I'm now old enough (although still remarkably young!) to use that clichéd expression 'In my day...' And in my day, we were simply not allowed to graduate without completing a quota of the full gamut of restorative and even surgical procedures, including intravenous sedation. Those that graduated years before me do have a slightly legendary status, having clearly had to undertake far more tasks than even I did during my time at dental school. But I do not wish the same to be true of those that come after me, to regard my generation as 'legendary', as that would only mean the profession has become more diluted and pared down, with less capability to serve our patients rather than more.

Surely, this trend is both detrimental to dentists, and dangerous for patients. I

do not doubt the quality and calibre of teaching in dental schools today. But that glorious time of Cold War anxiety and self-serving capitalism that defined a generation also trumpeted a stronger, prouder and fuller curriculum in dentistry that churned out highly skilled practitioners, albeit into an NHS system that rewarded brevity and quantity, rather than harnessing those talents.

But today, with the NHS dental provision seemingly exhaling its final breaths, the market and demand for skilled and educated graduates is keener than ever. Necessitated by this, the basic skillset procured from dental schools should therefore be mightier, not weaker, than it ever was. Patients are becoming increasingly more informed about treatments and what their procedures entail. How can we face them, let alone treat them, if our core armoury is lacking in the technical weapons that were standard issue a mere decade ago?

The late President John F. Kennedy noted the certainty that '*the greater our*

knowledge increases, the greater our ignorance unfolds...', and whatever miraculous strides we have made to advance our beloved craft of dentistry, the '*vast stretches of the unknown, and the unanswered, and the unfinished still outstrip our collective comprehension.*'

So, surely, given the progress we continue to make daily in the science and delivery of dentistry, the basic undergraduate knowledge needs to be more capacious, not less. Our desire to provide future dentists with the robust foundation they need for confident practice should be more passionate, not less. And our opposition to the selective cull of disciplines from the dental curriculum needs to be more vocal, not less. Otherwise, the future of this vocation will never be able to exploit its own evolution. We may be condemned to harking back to a time of longing, when doves cried in the purple rain, a dumpy little alien phoned home, and Ferris Bueller enjoyed a day off while dentists were being trained in dentistry.