



Presidential address

Frank Holloway

Send your comments to the Editor-in-Chief, British Dental Journal, 64 Wimpole Street, London W1G 8YS
Email bdj@bda.org

Frank Holloway was installed as the new President of the British Dental Association at the 2012 British Dental Conference and Exhibition held in Manchester on 26-28th April 2012. The following is his presidential address.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the 2012 British Dental Conference and Exhibition.

The first thing I would like to do as President is to pay a very warm tribute to my predecessor in this post. Janet Clarke has been an absolutely brilliant President for the BDA over the past year and has worked extremely hard combining this with a very busy full time job and raising a family. I never dared ask what she did in her spare time. As soon as I had been elected at last year's Conference I approached her for advice and assistance; she took pity on me and throughout her presidential year has kept me informed of everything I needed to know, whether it was something difficult to be aware of or just something that was good fun to look forward to and, most importantly, which chain of office to wear and when. So I now feel much more knowledgeable, though no less intimidated, about what the coming year holds for me, and Janet, I feel honoured to be following in your footsteps as BDA President and I am very grateful to all of you for giving me this opportunity.

It seems to be something of a tradition for the new President to look back at his or her own working life experiences to base this talk around and that seems like a good place to start, especially as I've had a particularly chequered career including hospital, NHS and independent practice, working overseas and eventually settling on a career in the Armed Forces.

Very few dentists would say that this is the best of times for the dental profession in the United Kingdom and I am sure a good number would say it could be the worst of times. It's hard to argue with this but what I would like to try to do is bring some perspective to the situation.

After I qualified I completed a couple of house jobs because there was no vocational or foundation training in those days and I was very aware that professionally I was far from the finished article, despite the newly appended letters after my name. Then I went into a local NHS practice and was struck by the similarity of what all the experienced practitioners I met told me. They were unanimous that the best days of the NHS were long gone; the best time, they said, had been in the early days following the introduction of the air turbine, before the government realised dentists could now work much faster and so they reduced the payment per item, setting a trend that has

continued for many years. But having said that, nobody got rich but equally, nobody seemed to have any great difficulty making a good living.

After a couple of years I moved up to the West End, which had always been my ambition, only to be told that we were in the worst recession ever; there were power cuts, the three day week, a winter of discontent; nobody would be spending money on private dentistry. But we had some lovely patients, we did our best for them and, surprisingly, over the next three years patients did still value their oral health and the much anticipated reduction in demand did not materialise. In fact many of us found ourselves busier than we had ever been before.

A little later I went abroad to work for the US Army. This was immediately after the Vietnam War which had so divided the nation and the US Armed Forces were definitely not feeling happy but the Dental Corps used the experiences of the war to reorganise and improve themselves and by the time I left after less than three years they were back on the front foot, going from strength to strength, had never been in better shape and have never looked back.

From there I joined the British Army, only to be told from the first day that the best part of being in the Army had been the opportunity to live and work overseas but all that was over: we were winding down in Hong Kong, everything else east of Suez had already gone and I would be lucky if I ever got out of Aldershot. But over the next two decades I spent only four years in England and one of those was to do an MSc at the Eastman. The job was never easy but I loved every minute of it, especially all those postings overseas.

So it seems that wherever I have gone to people have been depressed and expecting the worst, and make of that what you will, but the reality has always worked out better than anyone expected and I think that now we need to be positive about the future. That is not to underestimate the problems the dental profession faces today. I am sure we could all come up with our own list of problems but it would probably include something about CQC and ticking boxes, the GDC would not escape comment, you might wonder if there could be a worse system for dentists or their patients than UDAs or you may reflect on whether you could find any evidence base for HTM01-05?

Or are you just more concerned about the national economic situation? If you are thinking of starting an undergraduate dental course you will be worried about student debt, if you are finishing the course you will have just as much worry about finding a foundation training place and if you have been in practice for a while you will be pretty grumpy about losing your seniority payments, having your income frozen while your practice expenses keep on rising and wondering if you will be able to carry on using amalgam. And probably the most pressing issue of all at present is the forthcoming Health and Social Care Bill and knowing what to do about that is really difficult for the dental profession.

So should we all pull the duvet over our heads and hope the world goes away? Or do we accept the fact that change is going to happen and decide that we should do something about it? It would be easy to think that no previous generation had had to face problems like ours so the situation must be hopeless but looking back over my own career there have been plenty of apparently hopeless times and the same has been true however far back we look. The oldest reference I could find about the inevitability of change and how to manage it was for Heraclitus in Greece 2500 years ago. He made his name by philosophising over change in every aspect of life and the world: his most famous quote was 'No man ever steps in the same river twice'. That was probably quite a conversation killer in ancient Greece but in that respect nothing has altered today. We cannot prevent change. But we can certainly have a good try at managing it.

And that brings me on to where I believe the BDA fits into all this. For more years than I care to remember I have served on BDA committees and right from the start I have always been impressed by the sheer professionalism and dedication shown by all the BDA staff from the Chief Executive down. I think the membership would be genuinely surprised and impressed, like me, to know the effort that goes into the BDA's everyday business. And of course, that level of output requires a massive ongoing effort to keep the business focused. And an example of the success of that is shown very clearly in the smooth run-

ning of this conference year after year, reflecting a huge effort over many months by the events team.

And when it comes to dealing with the other issues I mentioned earlier they are all being monitored or actioned by one of the BDA committees which together cover every area of dentistry.

For the last six years I have been a member of the Representative Body which has acted like a parliament for the BDA's members. This has been the senior forum where all the problems and issues facing the profession are thrashed out. And anything not completed in, what can sometimes be a very long Saturday, continues to be discussed and argued over online by the Representative Body members who give up their own time to further the aims of the BDA.

Soon the Rep Body, together with the Executive Board, will be replaced by a Principal Executive Committee to make sure the BDA is fully compliant with both company and trade union law and this will be supported by a UK and four country councils to improve still further the democratic strength of the BDA. But I'm sure the members of the new PEC and the councils will show the same high level of dedication as those of the outgoing Rep Body and I would encourage every one of you to add your support and consider standing for a seat on your local committee so that you can make your mark in ensuring that we manage the changes heading our way. And don't do it just for altruistic reasons: the chances are you will really enjoy yourself, you can make some very useful contacts and learn a lot to help you in the day job. So please, don't stand on the sidelines. Get involved. You can make a difference so help set the agenda and ensure a better future for our profession.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I feel extremely proud to be taking over the Presidency of the association that is performing so well in such difficult circumstances and once again I would like to thank the membership for giving me this opportunity and I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible over the next few days and the coming year. Thank you.

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2012.370