Looming unemployment...figures

Stephen Hancocks OBE
Editor-in-chief

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

EDITORIAL

'How many things by season, seasoned are' opines Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* with a delicate sense of vivacious wellbeing. One might be forgiven for thinking that in dentistry too some topics are affected if not by season then certainly by cyclical patterns, driven partly by links to academic terms. The current controversy while admittedly only in its second revolution of the wheel concerns the number of Foundation Dentist Training (FDT) places (formerly Vocational Training) that are available to new graduates.

Figures published last month by the UK Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors (COPDEND) confirm that 1,139 applicants will be competing for the estimated 952 funded training places in NHS practices that will be available. One thousand and twenty-six of the applicants are current students at, or recent graduates from, UK dental schools.

The announcement by COPDEND follows a recent admission by the Department of Health (DH) that 35 UK graduates were not allocated DFT places in 2012.

The BDA and the Young Dentists Committee in particular, who have set up a Government e-petition (<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/40302>), have been rightly, heavily critical of the situation. In appropriate and proportionate support of their members and the profession as a whole they have pointed out that it is a waste of tax payers' money to have trained these young people at an estimated cost of £150,000 each, let alone the personal debts amassed during the five undergraduate years. While no one would dispute this, the scale of the financial burden is infinitesimal beside other government maladministration. The projected cost of mishandling the West Coast rail franchise at £40 million in compensation alone would on this basis serve to educate some 250 new dentists. No, it is of course the personal impact on those excluded for the rest of their career, presumably, from holding an NHS dental contract, never mind the psychological rebuff that is the real issue here.

THE UNKNOWNNS OF THE NEXT NEW CONTRACT

But a quick glance through the retrospectascope gives us a clue to the background of this parlous state of affairs. We are currently producing many more dental graduates than ever before, the General Dental Council website reporting that there were just under 40,000 registered in October 2012. A result of the previous government's sprint to open new dental schools and increase student numbers in existing schools, it is the sharp end of what is increasingly looking like an ill-judged policy.

Prompted by a widely publicised 'shortage' of dentists at a time when many patients were unable to find NHS provision, the move was widely questioned as being in reality a shortage of dentists unwilling to work for the NHS, rather than an absolute shortage. Be that as it may, it led the DH to take the somewhat extraordinary step of creating a recruitment stand at the FDI Congress in New Delhi in 2004. All this seems horribly ironic now when such graduates are prevented from working in that same service, by that same system.

With apologies to the feelings of the colleagues caught in the middle of the current situation we might have to regard this as a temporary glitch of numbers, a sort-of baby-boomer over supply that will flatten itself out in due course. My concern however is that this is another factor which will weigh heavily on future workforce requirements. As is common knowledge, workforce planning is notoriously difficult in dentistry. The variables are numerous and near-impossible to quantify from both sides of the equation. What will be the need, or is it more correctly termed the demand – and is that clinically defined need or patient led desire? How will a female-dominated profession fare in the distribution of workload? Will falling disease trends mean a market that will dictate a vastly different type of practice from the one we have known in recent times? I have argued this already earlier this year¹ and although Professor Steele in an interview in the *BDJ*² provided the reassurance that 'it's not as if we are going to run out of work', I stand by my predictions that the type of that work will be distinctly different.

Such waters are further muddled by the unknowns of the next new contract – although this is no reason to stall on decision making, or decision guessing. However well the next government (since the pilots are not due to be completed until after the 2015 general election) crafts the conditions there will not be enough state money to employ 40,000 full time dentists in the manner to which they would wish to be accustomed. Perversely then, it might be argued that those new graduates who do not get a FDT place may in the long run be better served in their careers as they will have to face the realities of the future shape of dental practice in the UK much earlier than their NHS-enabled colleagues. How fascinating this debate will seem in another twenty years' time; what seasoning then?

1. Hancocks S. A job for life or for living? *Br Dent J* 2012; **212**: 101.
2. Doherty R. Jimmy Steele: 'It's not as if we are going to run out of work'. *Br Dent J* 2012; **213**: 251–253.

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2012.990