Defining moments

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In a scene near the beginning of the classic 1960s film *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman's young character Benjamin Braddock is taken to one side by a family friend and given a single word of apparently worldly wisdom 'plastics'. It is played very seriously, which is what makes it so deliciously absurd, but it was undoubtedly the sort of careers guidance that was handed out at that time in the anticipation that plastics were the future. And so it turned out to be; where would we be without them?

As with the substance itself in its countless forms the word plastic has many uses and connotations too, not all of them very flattering. We refer to credit card funds as plastic money, implying that it is not quite real. We use it as a somewhat disparaging adjective for something (or somebody) that does not quite match our standards or tastes and we infer that at best it will be a transitory or temporary solution to whatever problem we are trying to solve. A plastic one will do for the meanwhile.

We are also guilty of using the word somewhat loosely in clinical dentistry. For example, all restorative materials can be described as plastic because of the requirement we have of them to be malleable to enable placement in a cavity or on a tooth surface. So, slightly bewilderingly in view of the ongoing debates, amalgam is technically also a plastic material in that it has inherent plasticity. More usually we think of plastics as non-amalgam restoratives; the composites, glass ionomers, compomers and other resin variants. Then again, we also use the term to describe the instruments we manipulate in placing and shaping the materials 'please pass me the flat plastic'. Very confusing.

DENTAL PLASTICS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

The subject is of relevance because we need to be vigilant about the materials we are using in the light of the new Minamata Convention, as touched upon in a recent editorial.[1] While breathing a collective sigh of relief that amalgam has not been banned but is rather being 'phased down', the dental profession has been given some time to possibly develop new materials and to ensure that the other materials that we are currently using are also safe environmentally. This is important because the charge against mercury in amalgam fillings and the impetus to reduce and then eliminate our reliance on it is based on environmental considerations.

Coming to the aid of the cause is a welcome announcement from the Shirley Glasston Hughes (SGH) Trust Fund which is inviting tenders for a research of grant of up to £200,000 (in real not plastic money) for projects which will investigate the question '*Do dental restorative materials containing plastics act as environmental pollutants?*' Bids for the funding must come from teams led by a primary care dentist and research proposals have to be received by 29 April 2013. Full details can be found on www.bda.org/curiousabout. Applications will be assessed by a panel of international experts, with the winning bid expected to be announced in September.

The topic was selected by dentists and dental care professionals on the SGH's new site 'Curious about' which invites users to post questions and comments on four topics that have been raised previously – patients' attitudes to the phasing out of dental amalgam, occupational risks associated with clinical dentistry, the effects of cognitive behavioural therapy on phobic or fearful patients, and the relationship between dental and systemic disease – and contribute further suggestions of areas for investigation. Evidence summaries will be produced in response to suggestions, and areas for which an evidence base is lacking will be considered for the research grant competition in 2014. The SGH (a restricted fund within the BDA Trust Fund) was founded in 1991 after Shirley Glasstone Hughes left her legacy to be used to provide grants for dental research. The focus of the fund is research into primary dentistry and the fund aims to generate a body of relevant research for practising dentists.

The topic seems a very fitting one given the current situation and there is no doubt that the green agenda is already snapping at the heels of the profession. A whole session was devoted to it at the FDI Annual World Dental Congress in Hong Kong last year and we will be returning to the topic again in the *BDJ* in the coming months. Risks are not only necessarily environmental either. Concerns that some constituents of dental materials, such as bisphenol-A, may have health risks to individuals could mean that ultimately amalgam is seen as safer in comparison. How ironic would that be?

On the matter of definitions though we are not alone in using the same word in different contexts. To a physicist 'moment' as well as meaning a fraction of time is also a perpendicular distance from a point to a line or a surface while to an engineer it is a force from an axis multiplied by the magnitude of the force. It is time that we take such a defining moment to apply knowledge and force to our arguments.

1. Hancocks S. A sense of place. *Br Dent J* 2013; **214:** 91.

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