It's the environment, stupid

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EDITORIAL

US President Bill Clinton is credited with first uttering the expression 'It's the economy, stupid' as a clear cut reminder that there are certain fundamentals in life that override all other considerations when the choice is limited to voting. But if it is true of the economy then it is also increasingly pertinent to the environment.

There has been widespread positive welcome and overwhelming support, including from the BDA and FDI, for the Minamata Convention (<http://www.unep.org/newscentre>), an international treaty on mercury announced earlier this year and signed in that eponymous Japanese town on 10 October 2013. I touched on the Convention in a previous editorial¹ as, most importantly for the dental profession, it includes a phase-down in the use of dental amalgam as a restorative material rather than a ban; a possibility which had been hitherto floated as a near certainty and arguably only avoided by substantial and well co-ordinated lobbying.

Since then, as well as other comment, we have published two linked opinion pieces comprehensively reviewing the consequences of the Minamata agreement and urging uptake of composite materials in whatever length interim period we now find ourselves (the Convention does not specify this).^{2,3}

GREEN CONCERNS

The general concern of the Minamata Convention is environmental safety and this is a theme that I believe we should begin to take more seriously in dentistry in the wider context of our work and practice.

If you search for the word 'green' in relation to dentistry you are likely to come up with greenstick fracture (as in broken bones) or the periodontal indices of Green and Vermillion (as an aside I have often pondered on the odds of two periodontists working together so closely and both with surnames representing colours). Flippancy apart, the point is that environmental issues in dentistry, and indeed in medicine, have received scant attention and are somewhat marginalised if not ignored completely.

The question arises as to what we can do and the starting point may well be contained in the slogan 'think global; act local'. While on the macro-level it seems that as individuals we can have little impact on the phasing out of mercury and the global consequences of climate change, on the micro-level there is a range of considerations we can make to help influence the care of the environment.

Developing practice policies may seem like a hammer to crack a walnut but dental team members are great advocates

for change and development and can quickly become champions of green thinking. In fact, we have an excellent in-house example here at the BDA where the facilities team, whose responsibility includes the maintenance and upkeep of the building as well as staff health and safety, have for a number of years put into practice a wide variety of measures to help reduce environmental impact. Recycling is an obvious candidate as well as energy-saving light bulbs, ensuring that office equipment is programmed to switch to low energy mode when not in use and a list of other apparently small but cumulatively modest steps which make a difference.

Importantly, this also has an effect on the thinking of the staff. We do pause before using unnecessary energy, paper or other resources. Could a particular task be done in a more energy-efficient way; is it needed at all? Would a telephone call suffice? The same can certainly be true of dental practices and I hope that I will now be showered with examples of this already in place throughout the UK and indeed the world. Practice managers are particularly important in this context as they have their fingers on the pulse of ordering consumables, arranging recycling and monitoring energy usage through payment of invoices. But a practice ethos of being as green as possible quickly spreads. Additionally, it sends out very positive messages to patients and others connected with the practice. Showing a care for the environment implies caring in general which in turn suggests attention to detail and sympathetic listening skills. There is a strong argument for the virtuous circle. This is true of the activities of large companies and corporations too, and an element of social responsibility is seen as being good in itself as well as projecting a positive image.

The trouble with human beings is that virtually everything we do interrupts up some ecological or natural system and as an activity, dentistry is no exception. It stands to reason then that we are not going to either change our ways overnight, or the impact that they make. However, there are steps that we can take to modify, slightly soften and possibly engender a small and definite difference to the environmental stress that we cause. What can we do? 'It's the practice, stupid'.

1. Hancocks S. A sense of place. *Br Dent J* 2013; **214**: 91.
2. Lynch CD, Wilson NHF. Managing the phase-down of amalgam: part I. Educational and training issues. *Br Dent J* 2013; **215**: 109–113.
3. Lynch CD, Wilson NHF. Managing the phase-down of amalgam: part II. Implications for practising arrangements and lessons from Norway. *Br Dent J* 2013; **215**: 159–162.

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