

NOW AND THEN

As university folk will confirm, being part of a social club or an association is fantastic fun. Initiation ceremonies aren't often the most enjoyable of experiences (this writer speaks from experience), but what is life like for those behind the scenes? What are the main concerns for association presidents to deal with? More to the point, what was it like then, and what is it like now? We asked Secretary of the UCH Dental School Old Students' Association Christine Setchell and KCL Student President Deshvir Nandra those very questions.

How did your role come about Christine?

CS I was volunteered! UCH Dental School Old Students' Association was formed in 1963 so that graduates could maintain contact with the school (and one another) when their membership of the Student Dental Society ended. All former students and staff automatically belong. Before the dental school closed in 1991, the most regular event traditionally organised by the Association was an annual dinner in University College London, preceded by an annual general meeting in the Medical School. Every three years an Alan Shefford Memorial Lecture was presented, usually by a distinguished former student, to commemorate a long-serving dean. The Association was administered by the Dental School and the last Dean hoped to run it from home after the school closed. My husband Derrick had been elected President for 1991-2 and no sooner had he been installed than the Dean announced that he would be unable to support the OSA as he had accepted an offer to teach in the Dental School in Hong Kong. Nobody knew whether there would be any interest in the 1992 meeting

STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS

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Christine and Derrick Setchell

but it was clear that if one was to be held at all, we would have to arrange it! At an extra-ordinary 'executive' meeting, Derrick somehow became the new Honorary Treasurer, as well as President, and apparently proposed that I should become the Honorary Secretary to assist him. He had previously volunteered to create an electronic data base of the alumni if we could have the paper records and we received an index box with about 500 cards in it.

So in a day and age where almost everything is done on computers, you started the list from scratch?

CS Personal computers were relatively new then, but it was our intention to do as much as possible electronically. We started with the 500 names and addresses and now have over 1,200. We bought a copy of the Dentists Register and manually checked names against the first year 'mugshots' that former teachers were able to find. It worked well for the men, but women who had married and used their married names in the register could not be traced until the Dentists Register was published electronically. Then we were able to search for the women using the 'formerly' field which recorded their maiden name. I think that database is the main factor that has enabled our Association to sustain its activities to the present day.

This year is the 24th year since the dental school closed and we have organised 24 annual dinners. We now have a memorial lecture every two years when our dinner is on a Friday evening with a more formal

Saturday dinner in the alternate years. The announcement letter is sent in September, and we print, fold and place 1,200 letters into envelopes each time, with a loyal band of helpers. It works well but is hard work and beginning to be expensive. We are retiring from our roles as Hon Secretary and Hon Treasurer this year and those who are taking over are going to email the dinner announcement to our members, as most people now have email addresses.

What's it like now Desh? Do we take things for granted?

DN We're really successful at organising student events and social media plays a huge role in that. There are so many students now, and our events are cornerstones of the year so they often increase in demand year on year. Social media makes it very easy to advertise our events to a large number of people quickly and effectively. Students are working really hard so if they want to meet and blow off some steam or spend some time socialising then there are plenty of options. There are a lot of groups and associations, many of who co-ordinate their activities through social media.

How easy would it have been if you had social media Christine?

CS It would probably have been much easier to find and contact people for the Old Students' Association, but 24 years ago most people didn't have computers, mobile phones or email, and Facebook and LinkedIn didn't exist. I'm sure social media will yet play an important role in our future.

However, Desh is talking about dental student events. The Dental Society to which I belonged as a student held lots of events throughout the year. That was over 45 years ago and the school had an intake of 50 students per year, so probably fewer than 200 in the clinical years. Everyone literally knew everyone else; we were in the dental school every day and paper communications

worked surprisingly well. We had a 'pigeonhole' each into which quick handwritten notes of a 'social' nature, as well as official letters, could be put. Messages about missed telephone calls went in there as well! Events were publicised on the notice board in the students' common room. It was actually easy to communicate and I'm not sure social media would have made much difference to the success of the Dental Society for current students of that time.

50 people in each year?! That figure must be drastically different now Desh?

DN There are around 800 students and 200 members of staff now.

Does that reflect the growing need of the population?

CS More dentists are being trained now because people are keeping their teeth longer and need dental treatment into old age. There are fewer dental schools but they are much larger. In 1991 UCH and Edinburgh Dental Schools were closed because it was thought that too many dentists were being trained at a time when dental health was improving. Like many official predictions, that turned out to be an over-simplification.

What was the reaction like?

CS We were horrified that UCH was one of the schools picked for closure, but the decision had been made and nothing could be done to reverse it.

What would the reaction be like now Desh?

DN It wouldn't go down well! Staff and students alike would fight it and it would bring dental schools *together*. I certainly could not see it happening.

After 24 years it's your last year of organising the annual dinner Christine. You must have made some great memories and friends over the years.

CS Yes we have. When we took over the running of the Old Students' Association 24 years ago we had no idea how long it would continue and we are gratified that it is still in existence now. It still continues because people attend the annual events in sufficient numbers to make it

viable. Without their support it would not exist. Because the School closed in 1991 we do not get new members so it is a very exclusive Association. Our youngest members graduated in 1991 and are now in their 40s.

We have distinguished alumni who are invited to present the memorial lecture and Stephen Hancocks is giving it this year.

Desh where will you be in 24 years?

DN I hope to still be practising dentistry! Perhaps somewhere I can influence other people and give back to other students. It's amazing that the Old Students' Association is still going 24 years after the school closed.

CS It still exists because a lot of people find it a real joy to meet and catch up with people who shared a formative part of their lives. We hope it will continue to flourish in the hands of our successors, at least until 2029 when the youngest members will be well past retirement.

'More dentists are being trained now because people are keeping their teeth for longer'

Until now, the annual letter has been sent to people's current register address (if they are registered) and to a home address if not. Inevitably the proportion of our members who have retired increases each year and we are dependent on them to notify us of changes to their address. This year we are inviting people to give us their email address and of course to tell us if they change it in future. We hope that communicating with our members by email proves successful.

If you would like to get in touch with Derrick or Christine please email Christine@timewarpuk.net.

**INTERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION BY
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