CONFUSTICATION

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The BDJ Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews.

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I can't help wondering if we are confusing people. Confusticate is a word created by the coalescing of confuse and complicate and I fear perfectly reflects the information that is thrown at our patients, and by that I mean at us as well since in the widest sense we are all patients at some point, by health professionals but often through the media too.

We all joke about it. On Monday we're told that cheese is good for us, on Tuesday that it is bad for us, on Wednesday that a small amount is ok after meals, on Thursday that it should never be eaten in combination with pickle (I am making all this up just in case you think that the 'BDJ says...' and that you can quote it as real advice). But herein lies the rub, who do you believe and who can you trust?

We apparently live in an age of evidence-based everything, from the claim that more cats like one brand than another through to which implants last longest. So it doesn't seem too outrageous to expect the experts on any given subject in healthcare to have at least some sort of consensus of opinion, and yet attempting to get a clear answer is often nigh impossible.

None of this is helped when the basis of risk is either poorly explained or not mentioned at all. The recent pronouncement from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) provides a perfect example. After years of weary health promoters in all avenues of life plodding out the message of safe drinking at 21 units a week for men and 16 for women, and explaining

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what a unit was, and that it was on average and that it depended to some extent on your body mass index, the message was starting to sink in. People had some idea of quantification of the risk. It didn't mean that we drank up to the limit every week because we thought we had to, it just gave us a marker of what might be risky behaviour. Then we are told that there is no safe level of drinking alcohol. Period. That may very well be true. Well, pause, it MUST be true because it has come from the CMO; but is it actually helpful? Dame Sally might have added that there is no safe limit for flying in an airplane, crossing the road, eating smoked sausage or breathing polluted air but how exactly does that help us? If we stopped doing all of things because there was no safe level, we'd be dead in a much shorter time anyway.

My concern is that the net result causes people to vent the opinion that if there is no safe limit then they'll decide for themselves what risk they want to take. The danger is that their relatively uninformed risk taking might be a lot higher than they realise. If 'everything' is perceived as being bad for you then it doesn't really matter anymore what you do; does it?

This applies equally in the world of oral health and especially in the current maelstrom of hysteria around sugar, a subject about which we in the dental profession have been waving an apparently unseen danger flag for centuries past. We need to inform our patients about

prevention and about good oral hygiene behaviour patterns and yet we too are assaulted by conflicting information. Some of it is understandably subject to change. Not so long ago we thought that periodontitis was a marker for premature births and other associated problems, now, following extensive research it seems less likely to be the case. Relatively easy to accommodate and explain as it is better to be safe than sorry and better to have good oral hygiene anyway. But what of the dietary messages for example? It is all very well to measure the number of teaspoons of sugar in a bottle of tomato ketchup, and undeniably great that shoppers are taking notice. But is this the best way in which to convey the story of frequency of sugar intake, the knowledge that it is the consistency of the foodstuff consumed, the level of fluoride protection and so on and so forth that will ultimately dictate the risk of caries?

The matter is further complicated in a world of such fast moving communications. An adverse piece of information here or murmuring of a wonder cure there are so rapidly spread around the globe that despite one being in mid-mouthful of a cheese sandwich (and on a Tuesday) it is dropped immediately in favour of a blueberry yoghurt or a leg of lamb with no actual good reason.

More often than not the fallout is the middle ground of rubbing of chins, attempting to look worldly and opining 'moderation in all things'. Which is all very well up to a point but does undermine some of the specific advice that it would be beneficial to impart. Oh confusticate it!

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