

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Stuart Johnston

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

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Press releases or articles may be edited, and should include a colour photograph if possible.

My first duty and pleasure is to thank Nairn Wilson for the commitment he has shown in his presidential year. I have met him while he has been 'on duty' so to speak and there is no doubt he has been a splendid advocate for our Association and profession. The detail in his address describing his range of activities throughout the year shows that he has been totally committed to the BDA. I will have a lot to live up to in the coming year.

You will have heard others thank their family for their support. You don't realise until you actually sit and reflect on it the extent of the support that you have received, so my sincere thanks to them all, especially to my wife Marian.

Similarly your practice suffers from you dealing with emails between patients and constantly rearranging the appointment book. Hence my thanks to all the very tolerant practice team and to Len who bought the practice from me five years ago.

Since qualifying, with the encouragement of my first boss, I have taken an interest in the politics of dentistry and this has served me well both in respect of my personal interest and in relation to my professional advancement. By keeping involved, I have found out about developments before they have turned to reality and even had an opportunity to influence the direction of travel. In combination, this has helped me in the management of my own practice and has also given me immense personal satisfaction from the belief that I have contributed to the well-being of my chosen profession.

We all have decisions to make about our careers and business

'It is ever so easy to give opinions but much more rewarding to actually contribute to the future..'

matters and I certainly don't get them all right. But the support and advice from Wimpole Street has been invaluable, allowing me to put my own position into a wider context and develop my strategies for my practice. The BDA advice was clear after 1992, about diversifying our sources of income, which I duly did, despite working in what you may consider a difficult area. The 2006 contract was then much easier to cope with, although I must admit that I gave up the UDA treadmill about seven years ago.

Being President was never something that had crossed my radar, even though I had installed a few presidents as chair of the representative body. When I got over the shock, my initial emotions were of surprise and excitement. And then I remembered that I would be making a Presidential address!

This is not perhaps the natural thing for me. It has forced me to take time to reflect on what has shaped my career, inside and outside the BDA, and look at the influence on our profession in general.

I have just fully retired after 43 years in dentistry and 41 years in the same practice. This has left many of my old patients rather miffed that I have left them!

Sadly though, one of my preoccupations throughout the last nine months, from when the decision was made, has been my wondering if I could get through the whole of my career to retirement, without getting a letter from the wrong end of Wimpole Street. For all of us, the menacing profile of our regulator has become the stuff of genuine anxiety – irrespective of our past experience. A letter from number 37 is not something I have ever wanted,

but from the reports of others, it appears that I am in something of a minority in not having received one! I do hope that in saying that I am not tempting fate to deliver to me a post-retirement present!

When I was a GDPC vice chair during the three years of talks leading to the 2006 contract, the first words of the senior civil servant were that this was not a negotiation but that the profession was being consulted. The first year was positive, then the PDS results came in showing good quality indicators but a decrease in output, and it all went progressively downhill in every meeting from then on.

For the last six years I have had the feeling of *deja vu*. There have been talks, PDS and prototypes; I have heard very similar things at previous conferences. Ministers talk of good progress, but is anything happening that will deliver real change? As far as I can see, until the government looks at adjusting some of the fixed pillars of the system, there is no apparent solution.

I feel strongly that in any new system, the patients' and the dentists' interests must be properly aligned, to stop the constant testing of individuals' ethics. My concern here is for all those working under the cosh of the UDA, combined with an ever-tightening interpretation of the regulations and the pressure that it puts them under. The stress in surgeries must now be at record levels. It may lead to the GDC or even more disastrous consequences, and with regret, I have seen them close up with a few of my colleagues. We are also, with the rise of litigation, becoming more defensive in our approach to clinical situations. This surely cannot be in the patients' best interests? Though

if you ask about the interests of the lawyers who prosecute these cases and live on the fees, the answer may be different. Whatever the true motivations behind these additional levels of scrutiny and challenge, the net result is yet more and more stress for all concerned.

All of these concerns about stress in our profession has led me to choose Cliff Arnall, a clinical psychologist and superb presenter, as the speaker for the presidential lecture on Friday at 14.15 in Charter room 1. I encourage you all to attend this session and tell your friends.

Like many others, and I can see a few of them here, I got involved in the BDA not just because of the general support in my professional life, but because I got angry at the system. The last straw for me was when I heard, in 1992, our GDSC rep tell me we had to trust the government! Becoming actively involved has had some fascinating consequences. As a personal development plan it may have been a bit random, but others could see potential in me that quite frankly I could not see myself. This, combined with being too slow to say no, especially to the likes of Bryan Gillard and co., pushed me out of my comfort zone. Some of it was quite frightening initially, like being told off by Joe Rich for being too quiet, but I got there and, in the end, got comfortable and then I was off to another level.

In 2004 I found myself with Susie Sanderson representing BDA at the World Dental Federation meeting. This was the start of work both at world and EU level that has been seriously challenging and yet rewarding, especially when you turn up with a win. And your BDA team has had quite a few. It has also opened up a range of once in a lifetime opportunities and has been a real privilege granted by the BDA to me.

The most significant thing that I gained was being able to see the big picture at UK, EU and global level and see how many of the world's dental associations face similar issues. It also became clear that more and more issues will be dictated from outside the UK. In this respect, the EU is of special significance with a constant stream of proposals where the interests of dentists must first be identified, a common EU

dental position developed and then be fought for, Brexit or not. But on the world stage, the Minamata treaty on mercury must represent the biggest recent threat to the status quo of dentistry in the UK. The BDA's representation in those debates was paramount in the avoidance of major disruption in dentistry. As is often the case, success there was what didn't happen, rather than what did! The ultimate agreement to a phase down in the use of dental amalgam rather than a precipitate and outright ban, meant that UK dental practice had the chance to manage the situation in an orderly fashion rather than being faced with an unmanageable and abrupt stop.

There are also other real wins for dentistry in the Minamata Treaty, for instance the first mention of dental prevention and the needs for materials research in a UN Convention. The fact that these arguments were then similarly and successfully articulated in Europe, with the EU Commission by the team led by Susie Sanderson, meant that the threat to the good order of UK dentistry was not once but twice averted by the quiet diplomacy of the BDA. We are now at the third hurdle of the EU Parliament and yet again the battle will be led by the BDA. To any who wonder 'what has the BDA ever done for me?' I cite these examples as major and significant achievements on your behalf – and they are things that you may not even have been aware of. And there are many more!

I suspect though that this is not the end of global environmental issues that we will face. The BDA is seen to punch above its weight in these areas by our international colleagues and long may it continue to do so.

Seeing the bigger picture is something I feel many colleagues may miss out on. Whether at local, national or international level, the pressure of work keeps you totally focused in your surgeries and it is too easy just to sit there, grumble and blame others, without taking any responsibility for it yourself. You may feel shy about expressing your opinions and believe me, I was when I started. But unless you get to the BDA and LDC meetings you have only yourself to blame. You will miss out on a better understanding of the issues, the wider support

of your colleagues and the opportunity to influence things, both for your profession and in your personal business decisions.

I would also like to challenge my profession over the big picture of 'where is the future for dentists?' Our DCP colleagues are keen to expand their horizons and not shy of fighting their cause. Too often dentists are keen to sit there and take what the world throws at them. Isn't it time that dentists started to take a serious look at where their profession is going, how it integrates with the rest of healthcare and drive our own agenda? You can have the 'it'll never happen' attitude if you want, but I have not found that produces good outcomes.

I have made some great friends during my time in the BDA. We have worked hard and enjoyed each other's company when socialising. However, the thing I value most is their honesty, integrity and commitment to their colleagues. It has been that 'safe place' that has given friends the opportunity to give me sage advice and insight. I won't trouble you with examples of their degree of honesty, but it has been sufficient to leave me in no doubt what they thought!

Thank you to all who have kept me on track and a special thank you to the BDA staff who have supported me in so many ways during the years.

So here is the summary:

I wonder where I would have been without the BDA, thanks to the friendships, the mentoring, the opportunities and most of all, sight of the big picture and the opportunity to contribute. Similarly, I feel the profession owes more gratitude to the BDA for its work on their behalf. I have talked of many current issues today that will influence the profession's future. There are many arm-chair warriors out there; it is ever so easy to give opinions, informed or not, but much more rewarding to be involved, to understand more, to have your opinions tested and to actually contribute to the future.

So I look to my term as president as an opportunity to thank the BDA for all that it has given me, its superb staff, its elected members and the wider membership. This year will have my full commitment to be a strong advocate for all to join us and to be active for our profession.

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