DOING THE RIGHT THING

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I begin with a quote from a young dentist: 'I won't lie, it had crossed my mind on many occasions, about leaving the profession, even though I do dearly love dentistry. The fear of being sued or of a Fitness to Practise (FtP) case is stressful and I'm constantly performing defensive dentistry. You can't afford to make even a single mistake, but we all know that this is near to impossible. Everybody makes mistakes at some point in their career'. Those comments really struck a chord with me.

When I qualified our regulator was very much in the background and rarely was there communication between them and individual members of the profession. If you were written to by the General Dental Council (GDC) then they usually had a good reason. If you were summoned to a FtP committee then they usually had a good reason and if you were suspended or erased then most of your colleagues were relieved to see rid of a colleague who brought their own profession into disrepute. The profession was supportive of the behaviour of the GDC because the Council behaved proportionately. So what has gone so badly wrong? How can we see a start to this change? For those of us who were at LDC Officials Day last year there was a presentation from John Milne describing the changes the Care Quality Commission (CQC) had made to the inspections of dental practices. The feedback was something along the lines of 'at last somebody within regulation is talking common sense'. And why does he lead his part of the CQC so? Well, he is a common

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sense man but also he is a wet-fingered dentist. He understands the profession. Maybe the way we can start to see that change in the way our regulator behaves would be by having such a dentist chairing the GDC to end the nonsense that has been going on there for the past five years, to see an end to good honest professional dentists, young and old, working within a climate of fear. A change that will allow our profession the freedom to start to innovate, free from the fear of constant litigation for the most minor transgression.

The recently announced sugar tax was something of a positive surprise but where should that tax be spent? What about on the nation's oral health? Does the Chancellor realise that the sugar that causes obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes causes tooth decay too? The message this seems to convey is that in the government's eyes, tooth decay doesn't matter. That children queuing up for extractions under general anaesthesia is OK and that it is alright for many deprived areas of our nations to display extreme levels of disastrous oral health. Even the minister couldn't be bothered to find the time in his schedule to come to speak here today at one of the most important and influential conferences of the year. Until the government wakes up and starts to fund the profession adequately these particular problems will persist. It might have been too much to ask for the entire funding raised by the sugar tax to be ploughed into oral health but that none has found its way to dentistry sends a clear and worrying message.

Many of us in the UK have asked if our endeavours actually

make a difference to our nation's oral health. Let me remind you of where we were 50 years ago. Edentulous patients formed 37% of the population, now it is 6% and still declining. In the past 11 years we have seen a 38% reduction in caries. Do we make a difference? The answer is yes we have, and yes we will continue to make a difference. The reason the nations' oral health has improved so dramatically isn't because of the Department of Health, not because of the GDC, not because of NHS England or the CQC but because of each one of us, what we do every day of our working lives. We have made the difference.

I'd like to close with a personal thought. I was proud to have entered the dental profession 34 years ago. It was like a family then – and still is to an extent, perhaps slightly more dysfunctional but still looking out for each other. Looking out for each other as colleagues of mine in Norfolk did when a long established and well-loved, single-handed dentist died suddenly in a tragic accident. To help his widow through that very difficult of times several, already very busy, colleagues worked additional sessions at his practice to complete all those patients still under treatment, no questions, no looking for thanks and for many of them with no financial remuneration. Just simply doing something that was the right thing. That's what makes me proud to be a part of this profession.

**Summarised from Nick Stolls' speech on 9 June 2016, at the Annual Conference of LDCs, Manchester*
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