EDITORIAL

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Presidential address

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BDA President 2018/19

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Peter Dyer has been a great President. When he made his Presidential address in Manchester last year, he said that Past Presidents had set a standard which he intended to keep and he undertook to devote his time in the coming year by representing the Association to the best of his ability. He has done that over and over again and will be a very hard act to follow.

I am immensely privileged, honoured and not a little humbled to accept the responsibility of the Presidency of the British Dental Association. And I do see it as a responsibility which I will fulfil as fully as I possibly can during this very important year. There are so many people to thank without whom this moment would not have arisen and I know that, if I don't mention you all by name, you will understand. South Yorkshire Branch Council nominated me for this huge honour and I do hope that all my colleagues with whom I have worked and played over the last 40 years in Sheffield, London and elsewhere know that with my affection, warmth and huge respect I have valued – and continue to value – your friendship, trust, good sense, wise advice and patience. Such powerful support, generosity and thoughtfulness cannot be measured.

This day marks a significant contemporary landmark. It is the first occasion that the BDA's Presidential meeting and Annual General Meeting are being held in the London headquarters of the Association. This feels right and so special and I'm thrilled that it falls to me to be the first President to enjoy the specialness of it. I hope too that everyone here will be gathering again at the British Dental Conference and Dentistry Show in Birmingham to learn from the experts, to learn from each other, to talk and to share news and, most importantly, to reinforce the bonds that should glue dentistry together.

I'm also delighted to recommend to you *The Member Series* – an extended suite of BDA member events that are being rolled out throughout the UK. Expert and Extra members have free access to some of these as a benefit of their subscriptions. As you will know, the General Dental Council introduced its new rules on Enhanced Continuing Professional Development in January 2018. It hopes that the requirement for a Personal Development Plan will encourage registrants to reflect on their practice, their learning needs and consequently their choice of CPD. I hope so too. Most of us are 'thinking dentists'

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but many of us are not used to formalising the reflection that ideally should follow a significant event. Indeed, we sometimes need more insight than is naturally within us even to recognise a critical incident especially if it is related to our communication skills. So this move by the GDC to encourage an actively reflective approach should not, in my view, be simply dismissed as another layer of regulatory meddling with boxes to be ticked.

We have all had the urge to attend a course because its topic was reassuringly familiar, the content would raise no challenges and actually provide a comforting affirmation that, in that area at least, we know what we're doing. Identifying the not-so-comfortable areas that we do need to learn about is a step to be taken before it's too late and something happens that we could have avoided.

I find myself now at a point in my career when I am lucky enough to be spending my time professionally enjoying every working day. And best of all, for many years, every day has been different. I have always been convinced that the most effective personal and professional risk management strategy for any primary care dentist is to make sure of getting out of the surgery to do something else for part of the week. Dentistry is potentially an isolating profession: even for those who work in large practices, the risk of increasing solitude in the midst of a large group of people is still very real.

In my own case it was nosiness that drove diversification. Perhaps also a case of catching opportunities as they drifted past and an element of not being able to avoid eye contact at that crucial volunteering moment. Often it's being in the right place at the right time. My opportunities might have been serendipitous or I've been attracted by the emergence of voids that needed filling. There is no doubt in my mind, though, that you can help your luck along through optimism and barefaced cheek. Or maybe, in my case, it's a total inability to see any difficulty and an unshakable belief that nothing is impossible.

And for those who inherently lack self confidence, everything *is* possible. Maybe the application of a risk assessment and a cost benefit analysis might be a good idea to decide whether it's sensible to get involved

but that's entirely different from a default position of, 'no, I don't think I can.'

'I could, but I've decided not to' is a powerful statement which I commend to those of you with packed diaries and an overblown UDA target. Once you're on a roll though, there is a danger of taking too much on at once. Or as Ashleigh Brilliant describes it: 'I try to take one day at a time, but sometimes several days attack me at once.'

Thinking about what to say in this address has reminded me of so much. Nostalgia really isn't what it used to be. I was a member of the BDA Representative Board for about 10 continuous years – and, I think the youngest at the time – before I actually stood up and said anything. I thought there wasn't much left to say. The gender split at the time meant that there were probably three women out of 90 people on the Board – certainly the ladies' loos were considerably less congested then.

scary. They decided to a man (and the odd woman) to walk away from the NHS, develop a citywide private fee scale; to continue to see children on the NHS but restrict the time they would allocate to that. Two days later in the Sheffield Star there was a front page headline misquoting me saying 'DENTISTS BAN CHILDREN' and nearly every dentist in the city was back at their NHS drills gathering registrations as quickly as they could. Disaster and two huge lessons learned. You can't herd dentists and never speak to journalists 'off the record'.

A couple of years later Bill Allen became Chair of BDA Council. I was elected to Bill's Council in the BDA – and even that election was one of those spur of the moment things. No canvassing, no electioneering, no deals done in the bar of the Holiday Inn. I just put my hand up and there I was. A triumph for democracy. Even in those days the BDA was

One great pleasure is that I speak with many dentists on a day-to-day basis, not only from the countries of the UK but also with those who live and work in Europe and across the world. Sometimes I'm talking with Dental Protection members in my role as a dentolegal adviser and with others it is because of the BDA's relationship with the Council of European Dentists and the FDI World Dental Federation. The insight that this provides is frequently startling and patterns emerge that prove that we are one profession across a big world.

Common to us all, for example, are the tensions that exist between personal professional accountability and systemic perverse incentives. These are inherent in the commercial marketplace and in contracts designed by governments or insurers under the guise of delivering value for money. For another example, the transactional approaches of younger generations are affecting not only the way dentistry is accessed but also the membership profiles of professional organisations in the developed world. The consensus is that the traditional membership organisation must appreciate its market and promote a style that appeals to those for whom it offers to provide paid services at an equally attractive price. The conundrum of having to be all things to all men is not new for professional associations but competing with it is the fact that brand loyalty is being devalued. One of my jobs this year is to be the BDA 'out and about'. It won't be difficult to be convincing in my advocacy – I know every dentist can benefit from membership of the BDA. I'm looking forward very much to creating opportunities where we can prove it.

I've spent a considerable amount of time working in Europe with CED colleagues and this has involved interactions with the relevant departments of the European Commission. From a professional perspective, there is no doubt in my mind that we have been stronger together in Europe although, arguably, difficulties affecting dentistry in the UK because of European Directives have usually arisen because of a failure to translate and enforce EU directives by some EU countries. I hope that we don't lose our constructive and helpful working relationships with our colleagues in the Council of European Dentists with whom we are currently bound by dedication to looking after dentists and the oral health of our communities.

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Everyone else did all the talking and grand oratory was the style of the day. I enjoyed it enormously but it's a rare woman who will join a debate simply to repeat something someone else has already said.

I was also learning my craft in small working groups, getting to know the movers and shakers and starting my apprenticeship with the Students Committee and the first attempts at including young graduates in the BDA. I discovered how satisfying it is to make a decision, make it happen and make a difference. Underpinning all this grew an appreciation of circumspection; seeing and understanding the whole picture is a prudent action if you want to effect change without the risk of unintended consequences. Thank you Linda Wallace for everything I learned from you. Back in Sheffield I was more vocal on my Local Dental Committee. The 1992 fee cut coincided with my election as LDC chair and what a baptism of fire that was. For a brand new LDC Chair, never was so pertinent the ever present mantra, 'if you want to be influential, you have to be involved'. Within a few weeks of my election I was chairing an emergency meeting of all the dentists in Sheffield. And boy, was that

looking for minority group representation. Bill recognised in me someone who was much happier and productive in small groups, contributing fully there but still wary of the grand oratory of the big formal stage. His insight allowed me to grow at my own pace, learning the ropes, gaining confidence in and a realisation of my own skills and jumping hurdles successfully when the time arose. I've tried to provide similar encouragement since then when I've discussed working strengths with those I've been privileged to mentor.

It's so important that you are allowed to function within the areas you are confident and comfortable. From that comes the power to expand your experience, to learn from others and to be secure enough to try and test new skills.

I've enjoyed reminiscing but I don't intend to rehearse the past any further. Save to say that the joy of working with clever, committed and thoughtful people cannot be overestimated. The process of solving strategic conundrums, working around negotiation blockages and achieving presentational manoeuvring is an intellectual Sudoku of great joy delivered as a team effort even if sometimes the team is only two.

Globally, the BDA has built relationships with dentists across the world and the BDA's strong international team is respected highly enough to support my election last year as Speaker of the FDI General Assembly. I personally miss the man we affectionately referred to as the Welsh Travel Agent these days. Flying past unfamiliar countries is easy with our past President Stuart Johnston. He has always done his homework and knows exactly how and where to find a taxi and a drink. Not only that but his integrity, skill, tenacity and professionalism is legendary on the dental world stage in relation particularly to his leadership in the global negotiations resulting in the Minamata Treaty.

I recently watched, through the magic of Whatsapp, the extraordinary efforts of colleagues promoting World Oral Health Day in their own communities across the globe. And it highlighted to me once more that each country has different priorities but that the majority use the event to raise awareness, provide education and resources, and try to secure governmental investment in oral health and particularly in the oral health of their children.

Starkly, it is only a short leap to realise that the UK can't sit back and be complacent. The BDA's 2017 manifesto, Putting Prevention First, told governments to get a grip. Statistics reveal that tooth decay is the number one reason for child hospital admissions in the UK. Staggering numbers of children are admitted for multiple extractions under general anaesthetic at staggering costs to the NHS. Alongside this, we apparently have the evidence that a minimally invasive approach in contemporary caries

management is the only credible way forward in modern dentistry. I believe this to be the case but that paradigm shift in treatment delivery can't suddenly start with the wave of a magic wand. I simply don't understand how we get there if there continues to be a governmental intransigence in investing properly in NHS dentistry and in the wider public and oral health agendas.

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Undoubtedly, the impending restrictions on the use of dental amalgam in pregnant and breastfeeding patients and the under 15s created by the Mercury Regulation and driven by the Minamata Treaty offers an opportunity to raise awareness of the possibilities within a reformed and properly funded oral health strategy. If dentists are expected to implement the legislative changes and also start to prepare for the possible emergence of further restrictions, an honest review of dental contracts is required urgently in all four UK countries.

After years of chairing, leading and managing in various situations I've recently started to investigate how it should be done. Apparently my own style is transformational rather than transactional. I love psycho-management speak and, when I was Chair of the BDA's Executive Board, Peter Ward genuinely delighted me with his very articulate and effective use of it. Transformational

working relationships at least sound as though both parties might agree to get things done willingly, accurately and successfully and still remain on speaking terms. I imagine my mum, who is here today, was my first role model but I also recall hiding my final school report from her for fear of a transactional outburst. My children are also here today – and are no longer children and consequently

immune from anything I can do to try to embarrass them. They might have a view about the nature of my parenting style and to find out more you might need to know that in their younger years I banned any involvement in bouncy castles and banana boats. No negotiation. I watch Fiona now, however, bringing up my gorgeous and good humoured grandchildren with transformational ease and listen to Jess describing her interactions with the young people she works with and I realise how much more I still have to learn and experience – and how excited I am to do so.

This year is going to be a huge privilege. Thank you for the gift of it. I intend to make my Association proud and look forward to meeting as many members and future members as I can. ■

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1. Brilliant B. *I try to take one day at a time, but sometimes several days attack me at once: More brilliant thoughts than ever.* Woodbridge Press Publishing Co., 1992