Let's get serious about mentoring

J. Brooks¹

In brief

Discusses the benefits of mentoring.

Details qualifications for mentors.

Discusses the value of mentoring.

The piece discusses the benefit of mentoring and the importance of formal training, in addition to valuing the skills a mentor can provide. As an understanding of mentoring grows within the dental profession, now is the time to ensure those who offer mentoring have the techniques, tools and skills to complement their professional/clinical expertise.

Mentoring has come to be recognised as of considerable benefit to individuals and the organisations they work in. For healthcare professionals, mentoring skills can also bring benefits for the patients they provide care to. Holt and Ladwa¹ conclude that the best tool for supporting the quality of performance of dentists is mentoring, and in a further paper in 2010 suggest that mentoring is an expression of the values and the culture of a caring profession seeking to promote fulfilment both for its patients and for its practitioners.

While the recognition of mentoring as a good thing is accepted, why does it seem so alien to place it on a professional footing? In essence, why is mentoring seen as something that most dental professionals can do? The skills of a mentor are quite different to those of a clinician, or a manager, leader or practice owner. These skills can come naturally to some dental professionals but for most they need to be learnt. Mentoring isn't just a chat between colleagues, nor is it something that comes automatically with experience in the field. Experience is of course important, but it doesn't mean that all experienced dental professionals are able to mentor. I have noticed

that for many non-clinical skills dental professionals can assume the subject is relatively easy and they have somehow acquired the ability to do it, perhaps by osmosis. Examples are management, leadership, chairing, supervision, training, appraising, coaching and mentoring. In my experience there can be an attitude of 'how hard can it be?' and almost an undervaluing of non-clinical skills.

Holt and Ladwa² describe how traditionally, a mentor has usually been a more senior trusted adviser and friend who fulfils a potentially paternalistic and directive role. However, the modern person-centred approach to mentoring puts the mentor less in the role of adviser and more in the role of facilitator. Nowadays, the role of the mentor is not to teach but to help mentees to learn for themselves, to discover their own direction, style and destiny, and the learning that they will require.

We in the profession need to ensure that the terms used to describe someone who is supporting a professional are defined and used correctly to reduce confusion about the type of support provided, and to be clear about the differences.

Interestingly, for those who have trained and taken qualifications in mentoring, the penny drops very quickly. Being a mentor doesn't come naturally to all dental professionals, it's actually demanding and there are specific skills, techniques, tools and methods that need to be learnt and then applied. After gaining a qualification and beginning to mentor, regular supervision with a trained mentor/supervisor is also important. Mentors need to regularly

review and appraise the work they do and have the opportunity to discuss their approach to mentoring with an appropriate colleague. Finally, regular continuing professional development needs to be undertaken. Mentoring skills must be refreshed and renewed.

All dental professionals could benefit from basic training in mentoring; the skills acquired will be put to good use in patient care, staff management and colleague relationships. In essence, if dental professionals know the basics of mentoring it will enhance the practice of dentistry. However, knowing the basics and applying them to yourself does not necessarily make you a mentor.

For those who wish to work as a mentor and use the skills regularly with another dental professional, more in-depth training and probably the acquisition of a qualification is really a must. Programmes are available, some specifically for dental professionals. I have listed some at the end of this piece.

Another aspect of getting serious about mentoring is the notion that it should be paid for and paid for at a reasonable rate. Skilled, trained mentors will add considerably to an individual's development and success – it's worth the investment in the future. So, why do we expect it to be free and something that you can expect automatically from more experienced, wise colleagues? Dental professionals have been very willing to offer their advice freely to colleagues in need of support, and no doubt will continue to do so, but this should not be confused with the more formal and structured support offered by trained mentors.

Dentalia Coaching and Training Consultancy, Coaching,
Park Lane Cottage, Park Lane, Watford Village,
Northampton, NN6 7UU
Correspondence to: Dr J. Brooks, MBE
Email: Janine.brooks47@gmail.com

Refereed Paper.

Accepted 1 September 2017

Published online 12 January 2018

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2018.39

Working regularly with a mentor will add considerably more to your future as a dental professional than any course in a practical technique, it's the skill that keeps giving. Delivered properly, it will enable the mentee to be more self-aware and to make the changes they decide to put into place in a more sustainable way.

Every dental professional deserves a mentor and all can profit from achieving

basic mentoring skills: the ability for non-judgemental listening; searching questioning strategies; and clear summarising to maximise the outcome of the discussion for the mentee (or the patient). But, let's get serious and give trained mentoring the attention it deserves and stop expecting it to be a free good.

Information to readers

The following are some of the Dental Mentoring Programmes available in the UK –

UCLaN Advanced Certificate: Mentoring in Dental Practice enquiries@uclan.ac.uk; *Dental Coaching Academy, PG Cert Level, 7 Leadership Coaching and Mentoring; Dental Coaching Academy PG Award Level 7 Coaching and Mentoring – Supporting Professionals*, info@dentalcoachingacademy.co.uk

1. Holt V P, Ladwa R. Mentoring. A quality assurance tool for dentists. Part 1: the need for mentoring in dental practice. *Prim Dent Care*. 2008; **15**: 141–146.
2. Holt V P, Ladwa R. Developing a mentoring culture in dentistry. Making a difference in a changing world. *Prim Dent Care* 2010; **17**: 93–98.