Letters to the editor

Send your letters to the Editor, *British Dental Journal*, 64 Wimpole Street, London, W1G 8YS. Email bdj@bda.org. Priority will be given to letters less than 500 words long. Authors must sign the letter, which may be edited for reasons of space.

Journalism and dentistry

Instant expert on dentistry

Sir, I recently attended a workshop hosted by University of Glasgow titled *Health in the news: Fact or Fiction?* where health researchers and journalists provided insight into how the media industry approaches the reporting of healthcare topics.

I observed a gap between the journalist's insight into the topic and their ability to appraise the evidence/story they have been given. They rely on the researcher/patient to provide the evidence and although they try their best to become an expert almost immediately this is impossible and therefore their article inevitably contains elements of bias.

The average earning of a journalist is £23,499 and I am aware that they need to write stories which will sell or find themselves unemployed; however, I feel they should be held accountable for what they write as this impacts society greatly. I believe journalists and health researchers/organisations have a responsibility to work alongside each other to ensure work is critically appraised prior to publishing.

I am sure we can agree that when discussing dentistry in the media the dentist is usually portrayed as 'the bad guy'. This does not help those patients with dental fear and anxiety, which has been estimated to be as high as 48% of the adult population.¹

A recent BBC item with the headline '*The screeching drill, the burnt flesh – my dental nightmare*' exemplifies this.²

This article describes a patient's experience of having upper anterior veneers replaced by crowns and the subsequent problems endured.

Although I agree this was not a pleasant experience for the patient and the treating clinician has a responsibility to attain

informed consent, the patient also has a responsibility to understand what treatment they are agreeing to. The article went on to touch on health inequalities as the patient discussed how she questioned how some people are unable to afford dental services.

None of the treatment in this article was completed in the UK where we are lucky to have the NHS, but even the NHS has its limits as costs are still required.

I believe the article highlights some important issues such as informed consent and oral health inequalities but instead of educating the population to the issues highlighted, it is more likely to have invoked fear into the masses.

Could the BDA play a role in working alongside the media to try and better educate journalists, and subsequently the population, on the true issues with health and not just the negative patient perspective which may lead to patients continuing to avoid the dentist, subsequently leading to poorer health outcomes?

H. Lundbeck, by email

1. Hill K B, Chadwick B, Freeman R, O'Sullivan I, Murray J J. Adult Dental Health Survey 2009: relationships between dental attendance patterns, oral health behaviours and the current barriers to dental care. *Br Dent J* 2013; **214**: 25–32.
2. The screeching drill, the burnt flesh – my dental nightmare. 21 July 2018. BBC News. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-44903041> (accessed on 9 October 2018).

Eddie Crouch, Vice Chair, BDA responds:

We know colleagues might conclude many journalists probably experienced some childhood trauma at the dentist. The Marathon Man messages always seem to cut through. The stories often focus on pain, on money, and sometimes find ourselves playing the part of villain.

The BDA's approach isn't to work in the world as it could be, but the world that

is. Dentists do not command the same sympathy of nurses – many on shockingly low incomes – or indeed medics confronting life or death conditions. That means we have to go the extra mile.

First and foremost as a profession with a big stake in the NHS, we must welcome the slings and arrows that come with accountability. The answer is never, contrary to the example set by some world leaders, to turn the tables and demand the media be held to account or cry 'fake news'.

Rather we aim to work constructively with the press. Where they overstep, we seek right to reply. Where we can work together, we do. It means we have a responsibility to put the public first, and show what's failing them as patients, and as taxpayers.

It's the 70-mile journeys patients across the South West are facing for access. About how officialdom's indifference to dentistry now costs the NHS hundreds of millions a year and the simple fact that a preventable disease is going largely unchallenged by government as the number one reason for hospital admissions among young children.

It has enabled us to take our message on a failed NHS contract from the One Show to the pages of The Times. Certainly The Daily Mail is not an outlet many dentists would describe as a traditional 'ally'. The headline 'Is your dentist a natural born killer?' might have been the giveaway.

However we must not demonise any media outlet, or pretend we can make them see the light. Our responsibility is to provide the facts, expertise and opinion that can condition the debate, stories which the media want to print. Outline understandable problems, and offer concrete solutions. Even in the Mail we are making headway. This will always remain a work in progress, but one we take with utmost seriousness.

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