And the winner is...

At one time even the notion of dental awards produced a slightly quizzical look and a shrug; now **Stephen Hancocks** finds it is a gold leaf-edged ticket to a flute of champagne.

There is something to be said for competitions and prizes, for choosing the best and naming the champions. They raise the profile – at least so we are led to believe – throw down the gauntlet for others to aspire to higher standards and greater achievements. But then there is also something to be said about people who put themselves forward for such praise. Are they really the leading lights or just the ones who actually bother to apply? How many times have we all meant to get around to, but not quite actually completed, the competition on the soap powder box which pleads with us to finish the sentence ‘Bubblo-shlosh gives the perfect fresh wash because...’ in not more than 157 words, let alone gone to the trouble of downloading dental entry forms, submitting photos and hosting an assessment panel visit?

The categories themselves are often a bit tenuous. ‘Best’ whatever or whoever are relatively straightforward. We can all relate to best dental nurse, best technician and best dental team member but then it becomes slightly trickier to go along with best innovative front office personnel. Organisers move subtly to other comparisons instead, such as most improved oral health educator, least grumpy hygienist, foremost health and safety staff rep in a lab employing five or more. Meanwhile a relatively new crop of accolades has crept in with almost a king’s new clothes feel to them. What, for example, does ‘the facility showing greatest adaptation in an ongoing changing environment scenario’ really mean? How does one define ‘the most reputable dental team transformed by imaginative solutions in a service ambience’?

Indeed definitions bring us on to a whole new area in the organisation of such back-slapping extravaganzas, which is the judging. Come the awards ceremony itself what is the chairman of the judging committee going to say? ‘This year it has been even more difficult than ever to decide who the winner is. My fellow judges and I have had the most arduous and tough choices to make in coming to our shortlist and indeed in deciding who to single out as best.’ How refreshing it would be if, as we the audience tearing at our bread rolls

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in the desperation of famished hordes, were told instead the real truth. ‘Actually this year the entries were such a pile of old tut that we pulled a random form out of the batch and spent the rest of the evening in the wine bar enjoying ourselves.’

The increasing, and totally deprecated, tendency for the crowd to go on talking, shouting, throwing place names at each other and completely ignoring what is happening on stage doesn’t actually stop the sponsors thanking everyone for taking part. ‘In the eyes of Dental Magnificence Plc, you are all winners tonight’; yeah right, can we get another bottle of Chardonnay over here please? Nor does it prevent the hapless host or pseudo-celebrity whose lot it is to be presenting the trophies to do all that usual stuff with the envelope. Really, it is such old hat isn’t it? They fumble around trying to tear open the top and then make a joke about how funny it would be if they couldn’t open it (no it wouldn’t even raise a titter, it’s paper for goodness sake, how likely is it that a child with two broken wrists couldn’t tear it apart by some contortion?). Or they speculate on what a jolly jape if it turned out to be their gas bill instead (yawn). Get real, just text it to everyone in the room, then they’d take notice.

Much can be salvaged by slick organisation on the night (or lunch if it’s really classy – look around, who else can afford to take *all* day off?) Forget the inter-course presentation of a few awards. No one wants to eat soup and then have to clap oral hygiene projects for three-quarters of an hour before the chicken arrives. It’s always chicken. Similarly, serve the poor blighters their meringues with red berry compote jus and light caster sugar snowfall to give them the strength to cheer for the dentist with the most creative excuse for not paying more than the minimum wage, award.

Probably what we really need is a television talent show type approach where three or four dental glitterati sit in judgement and tell the runners-up why they’ve got to go back to the practice or lab empty handed. Imagine the tears, tantrums and foul language. Now that would be a night out to savour. I think I’ve just invented a new concept, the best awards event award. Hmm, see you there.