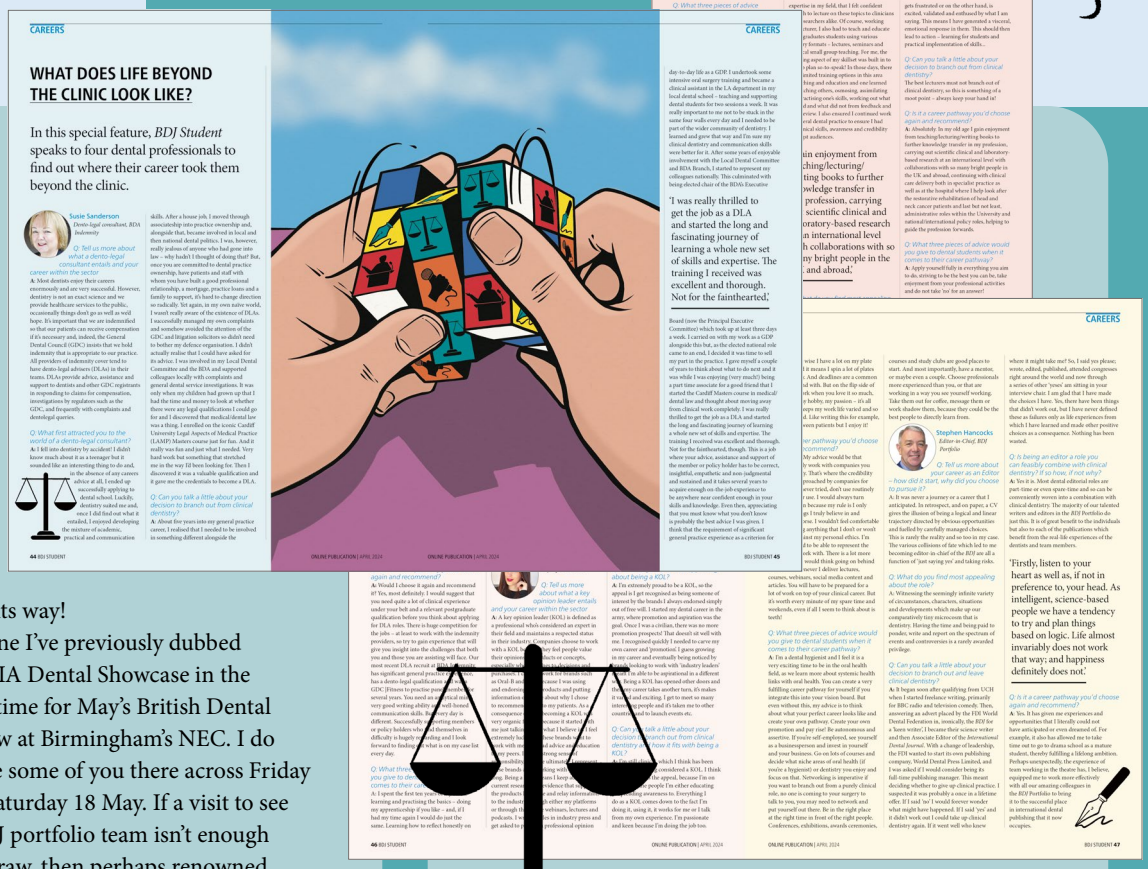
A WELCOME FROM THE EDITOR

David Westgarth, Editor,
BDJ Student



CAREERS

WHAT DOES LIFE BEYOND THE CLINIC LOOK LIKE?

In this special feature, *BDJ Student* speaks to four dental professionals to find out where their career took them beyond the clinic.

Susie Sanderson
Dento-legal consultant, BDA Indemnity

Q: Tell us more about what a dento-legal consultant entails and your career within the sector

A: Most dentists enjoy their careers enormously and are very successful. However, dentistry is not an exact science and we provide healthcare services to the public, occasionally things don't go as well as we'd hope. It's important that we are indemnified so that our patients can receive compensation if it's necessary and, indeed, the General Dental Council (GDC) insists that we hold indemnity that is appropriate to our practice. All providers of indemnity cover tend to have dento-legal advisers (DLAs) in their teams. DLAs provide advice, assistance and support to dentists and other GDC registrants in responding to claims for compensation, investigations by regulators such as the GDC, and frequently with complaints and dentolegal queries.

Q: What first attracted you to the world of a dento-legal consultant?

A: I fell into dentistry by accident! I didn't know much about it as a teenager but it sounded like an interesting thing to do and, in the absence of any careers advice at all, I ended up successfully applying to dental school. Luckily, dentistry suited me and, once I did find out what it entailed, I enjoyed developing the mixture of academic, practical and communication skills. After a house job, I moved through associateship into practice ownership and, alongside that, became involved in local and then national dental politics. I was, however, really jealous of anyone who had gone into law – why hadn't I thought of doing that? But, once you are committed to dental practice ownership, have patients and staff with whom you have built a good professional relationship, a mortgage, practice loans and a family to support, it's hard to change direction so radically. Yet again, in my own naïve world, I wasn't really aware of the existence of DLAs. I successfully managed my own complaints and somehow avoided the attention of the GDC and litigation solicitors so didn't need to bother my defence organisation. I didn't actually realise that I could have asked for its advice. I was involved in my Local Dental Committee and the BDA and supported colleagues locally with complaints and general dental service investigations. It was only when my children had grown up that I had the time and money to look at whether there were any legal qualifications I could go for and I discovered that medical dental law was a thing. I enrolled on the iconic Cardiff University Legal Aspects of Medical Practice (LAMP) Masters course just for fun. And it really was fun and just what I needed. Very hard work but something that stretched me in the way I'd been looking for. Then I discovered it was a valuable qualification and it gave me the credentials to become a DLA.

Q: Can you talk a little about your decision to branch out from clinical dentistry?

A: About five years into my general practice career, I realised that I needed to be involved in something different alongside the day-to-day life as a GDP. I undertook some intensive oral surgery training and became a clinical assistant in the LA department in my local dental school – teaching and supporting dental students for two sessions a week. It was really important to me not to be stuck in the same four walls every day and I needed to be part of the wider community of dentistry. I learned and grew that way and I'm sure my clinical dentistry and communication skills were better for it. After some years of enjoyable involvement with the Local Dental Committee and BDA Branch, I started to represent my colleagues nationally. This culminated with being elected chair of the BDA's Executive Board (now the Principal Executive Committee) which took up at least three days a week. I carried on with my work as a GDP alongside this but, as the elected national role came to an end, I decided it was time to sell my part in the practice. I gave myself a couple of years to think about what to do next and it was while I was enjoying (very much!) being a part time associate for good friend that I started the Cardiff Masters course in medical/dental law and thought about moving away from clinical work completely. I was really thrilled to get the job as a DLA and started the long and fascinating journey of learning a whole new set of skills and expertise. The training I received was excellent and thorough. Not for the faint-hearted, though. This is a job where your advice, assistance and support of the member or policy holder has to be correct, insightful, empathetic and non-judgmental and sustained and it takes several years to acquire enough on the job experience to be anywhere near confident enough in your skills and knowledge. Even then, appreciating that you must know what you don't know is probably the best advice I was given. I think that the requirement of significant general practice experience as a criterion for

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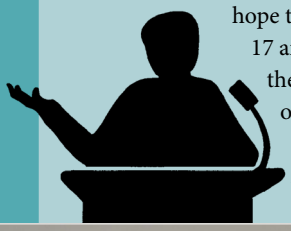
Hello, and welcome to the April edition of *BDJ Student*.

It's such a cliché, but where does the time really go? Last time I checked it was winter, and in the blink of an eye we're a third of the way through the year with the promise of longer, warmer days imminently. On the day of writing this editorial I have to say, it doesn't feel like it – another storm is on its way!

This point of the year is one I've previously dubbed 'conference season'. With BDIA Dental Showcase in the rear-view mirror, it's almost time for May's British Dental Conference & Dentistry Show at Birmingham's NEC. I do hope to see some of you there across Friday 17 and Saturday 18 May. If a visit to see the BDJ portfolio team isn't enough of a draw, then perhaps renowned entrepreneur and 'dragon' Steven Bartlett may be! You can find out more about his session in this issue's news.



It's an example of the beauty which lies within dentistry. He's obviously not a dentist, but his messages, takeaways and advice will likely prove to be invaluable to those in attendance. In this issue's cover feature, we explore that extension of dentistry in more detail, with four dental professionals talking in depth about their chosen career pathways outside of dentistry – it's well worth a read.

A reminder to all student members, dental societies and keen writers – get in touch! We're always delighted to hear from you and the enthusiasm you bring (not to mention the quality of your ideas, too!) You can reach me on david.westgarth@bda.org, or through *Instagram* @portfoliobdj.

Enjoy the issue, the lighter evenings and hopefully the warmer weather! On behalf of the entire BDJ portfolio editorial team, we wish you the best of luck as the academic year draws to a close and exams start.

David Westgarth ■

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