

INTERVIEW

Stephen Hancocks: 'The *BDJ* is a very precious thing'

Interview by Ruth Doherty



To celebrate Stephen Hancocks' 15th anniversary as Editor-in-Chief of the *British Dental Journal* (the longest term of office for anyone holding that role), we turned the *BDJ* lens on Stephen himself. In this interview he tells us how he ended up working in dentistry while writing sketches for *The Two Ronnies* on the BBC, and reveals the secret to writing a great *BDJ* paper.

Why did you choose to study dentistry?

Because as a teenager I wanted to be an actor and I decided I could legitimise that goal by choosing a 'proper' job to eventually fund something I really wanted to do. I have the evidence-base in my adolescent diaries: the plan was to earn money as a dentist and then go to drama school. It took nearly 20 years longer than I anticipated but I actually did it in the end.

As a child, I fell in love with the theatre and I was certain acting was what I wanted to do. Then as I started to get older people began to murmur about it being an insecure career. I remember distinctly one of the older actors, during a production I was involved in at Watford Palace Theatre, telling me how I could easily end up in my early twenties eating baked beans out of a tin in a bedsit in London. And I thought 'that sounds great!'. But I did see the sense that it would be a hard road.

Then, in school we had to do a project on something to do with health and I cannot tell you to this day why I chose to investigate dentistry but I did. We had a very good family dentist, Colin Andrews, and I decided to go and ask him some questions for the project. He was very kind and let me go and watch him work for a day. I realised that he had a good standard of living. He worked hard but not really long hours. This was in

the late 1960s and I was about 14. Colin had trouble finding a dental nurse who would work for him on a Saturday morning, so in typical cheeky mode, I said I'd do it. So he bought me a short white coat and I earned 10 shillings a morning. In those days that was a monstrous amount of money for a teenager to be earning and at coffee break we had a cheese and tomato roll or a cream horn from the bakers downstairs. Such luxury.

The thing that cemented the decision to choose dentistry for me was a careers interview at school (a Secondary Modern in Hemel Hempstead where most of the

Did you keep up the acting in school?

Yes, and ironically at the same time as I was having interviews at dental schools, I was offered an audition at the Drama Centre in London. I just said no. It was a hard decision but my head was ruling my heart in those days.

Where did you get your love of the theatre and acting from?

Probably from my mother who loves the theatre and from my dad – he was a great mimic and loved telling stories. And I just enjoy being in front of an audience – in particular, the adrenaline of people's laughter.

'It's about saying yes, taking chances and being cheeky'

students went off to do apprenticeships at local businesses). At the interview they basically asked me what apprenticeship I wanted to do, and I said 'no, I want to be a dentist' and they actually laughed. Just laughed; imagine. Their reaction was a real turning point in my life because, even if I hadn't really wanted to be a dentist, the fact that they had that reaction made me want to show them I could do it. Luckily I found I really enjoyed it; otherwise I couldn't have stayed the course.

How did you end up as Editor-in-Chief of the *BDJ*?

As I have ended up doing most things in my life: by saying yes, taking chances and being cheeky.

I first wrote for the *BDJ* because of Dame Margaret Seward. One evening I was at a lecture at the Eastman Hospital and Margaret (who was editor of the Journal in those days) sat next to me and said 'Good evening Stephen.' I certainly knew who she was ▶▶

▶▶ but was very surprised she knew who I was. She must have spotted my surprise and said to me 'I know who you are. It seems you can write for the FDI [I was a part-time dental writer for them at the time] but not the *BDJ*, why is that?' And I said 'Well you never asked me!' And she countered 'If I ask would you?' and I said 'Yes of course!'. So the next morning I received a message from her office asking me to write a story for the *BDJ*. That was in 1985.

I was working in community and children's dentistry alongside my dental writing until the early 1990s. Then I started working with the FDI's publishing company (FDI World Dental Press) full time as their publishing manager. I said yes to that role on the basis that if I said no I might miss out on a good opportunity. Indeed, this role certainly led on to other things – spells managing communications at the GDC and Dental Protection, and becoming deputy editor of *BDA News* [as *BDJ In Practice* was at that time]. At one time I had the front door keys to all three buildings – the GDC and BDA on Wimpole St and the FDI in Soho.

I applied for the *BDJ* Editor-in-Chief role itself as I was then part time Commissioning Editor for the journal, primarily on clinical series and books. I'd never really considered it because in those days it was a full-time job

'Fluoride toothpaste and the reduction in caries has been a game changer.'

and I wasn't looking for that. But then the BDA contracted with Nature to bring the editorial and production of the *BDJ* to Nature and the job changed to part time.

Did you ever regret leaving wet-fingered dentistry?

I miss the patients most, their stories and being able to make a difference to their lives. I specialised in children's dentistry and special care. I miss the children's innocence and loved their laughter.

You had a spell of comedy writing for Radio 4 – how did that come about?

Again, being cheeky and just not taking no for an answer. There wasn't really the free time while doing the dental course to be involved in acting and dramsoc so I ended up turning to writing to keep up my creative, theatre link at that time. I used to



Senior Managing Editor Ruth Doherty interviewing Stephen Hancocks in December 2019

write the Christmas shows for the hospital (UCH). Then, towards the end of the dental course, I started writing sketches in the style of the *The Two Ronnies*. I submitted some material to 'The Script Editor, BBC TV' and I was astonished to get a letter back asking me to ring him and arrange a meeting. He was a chap called Ian Davison, was very helpful and to some extent mentored me. He suggested I write for the radio, particularly a

because they don't always get the chance for a wider life experience. As a result of following a 'stable' life, I've literally flown around the world and done the most amazing things, for which I am incredibly grateful.

What do you feel is the single most significant change in dentistry in the UK since your university days?

Fluoride toothpaste and the reduction in caries. It has been a game changer. Because of the decrease in caries rate, operative dentistry has changed and as a result of that people now have a different attitude towards oral health.

How do you feel the readership of the *BDJ* has changed over your last 15 years as Editor-in-chief? Do people communicate in the same way?

Electronic publishing has fundamentally changed the way we read, research and make sense of the world. The readership has increased beyond anything I could have imagined internationally making us, according to some measures, 'number one in the world'. My aim was to allow the readership the chance to debate, feel free to express itself and enjoy both reading and writing. I am amazed at how wholeheartedly, after a long period of timidity, they are now embracing this. No one knows the answers but we all know our own truths. Sharing them is key.

Has what *BDJ* authors want changed?

I don't think that's changed at all. It's about trust and credibility. Yes, there are ▶▶

programme called *Week Ending*. So I started sending material to them and they used it! I remember the first cheque I got for £1.50 - £1 for the first transmission and 50p for the repeat. I wish I'd kept and framed it. That was the real start of writing for me. I did eventually end up also writing for television and indeed, *The Two Ronnies*.

You appear to have had a significant focus on having a stable career and income. Where did that come from?

I think it was both common sense and being made aware of the good things in life, not necessarily the most expensive things, but just good food and nice things. Some people don't need that. Actors that I met at drama school had no care for that sort of stuff and I have great admiration for them. But to some extent what they gain in terms of personal and artistic credibility is sometimes sacrificed

« 101 online publications they could choose but I still think people look for the reputation and visibility that comes with publishing in the *BDJ*.

Has what the readers want changed?

I think that has. They want shorter pieces – for example, five top tips. That's something we are trying to do more of in the *BDJ*. So what we are

'Always, always, always meet a deadline'

doing is saying here are your top tips, but here is all of the background you might need as well.

You have an MA in Advanced Theatre Practice. Are you still writing and directing plays?

Currently no but I have plans. Studying for the MA in drama school, in the late 1990s, was the best and also the bloodiest 18 months of my life but I would not trade that time for anything. At the same time, I was working part time for the *BDJ* as the commissioning editor on books and also part time for the FDI. Exhausting but amazing.

The great thing about the MA course was that you went in with a 'strand', mine was writing, but you had to do a little bit of everything: design, acting, directing, sound, costume, a whole range of stuff. It really made you appreciate the role of *all* the people in the theatre. There were no 'five out of ten days', I'd either come home angry and frustrated or alternatively just float on a cloud of creative pleasure.

What play would you most love to have written yourself?

What a lovely question. My favourite play is *A Glass Menagerie* by the wonderful Tennessee Williams which transfixed me as a teenager; but I could never have written it. The one I think I would most like to have written and have unashamedly borrowed the style from for one of my own plays is *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard. It is a delicious blurring of history and the here and now. I also hate it because I am afraid that I can never match its brilliance.

What play that you've written yourself are you most proud of?

It is called *The White Pink*. It was about a chap from the Arts and Crafts Movement Charles Robert Ashbee. He took about 100

skilled craftspeople from Whitechapel to the Cotswolds in the early 1900s on the basis that he believed that if you looked after the person they would produce better artefacts. Ashbee was an odd character, with a very curious life story. And so the play was about Ashbee himself and the clash of culture between the 'immigrant workers' from London and the 'indigenous

population' in the Cotswolds. We toured the production and brought it to the village, Chipping Campden, where it had all taken place which was a fantastic opportunity and experience.

In your opinion, what makes a good *BDJ* paper?

One that tells the story of an initial observation or curiosity that ferments into a study which in turn makes potential changes in practice.

What are your top 5 tips for budding *BDJ* writers?

1. Understand the market that the *BDJ* is in
2. Follow the rules
3. Tell a story
4. Be cheeky and...
5. Always, always, always meet a deadline.

What are your three 'desert island' *BDJ* papers?

It's so difficult to answer this question, all our papers are so good!

1. Opinion '*This was something that happened to someone else*' – an HIV positive dentist explains¹
This was an important, anonymous article (the only one I've allowed in 15 years) by a dentist with HIV who had lost access to dentistry, his chosen occupation, due to a HIV diagnosis. It had an amazing impact and partly as a result of the ensuing publicity and awareness the rules around this have changed.
2. *Periodontal diagnosis in the context of the 2017 classification system of periodontal diseases and conditions – implementation in clinical practice*²
Though published recently it's already such a significant paper.
3. What about my own first *BDJ* article?
Only joking.

[Incidentally, Stephen's first ever story for the *BDJ* was a news feature in 1985 entitled *Nicola Boissard Research Fund. First British research chair in oral biochemistry.*³]

What three people would you most like to have at a dinner party?

David Frost, Dame Edna Everage and a humorous short-story writer like Patrick Campbell.

Obviously, I love Dame Edna who is a comic genius. Frost always fascinated me - he was so charismatic, and I adore Patrick Campbell's writing.

You're a keen gardener (with your own YouTube channel⁴) - what three pieces of advice do you have for gardeners at this time of year?

1. Allow the joy of the spring light to guide your decisions on planning, planting and sowing
2. Get on top of weeding from the outset
3. Plant or sow one plant this year that you've never planted or sown before.

So if Plan A was acting, Plan B was dentistry, and Plan C was writing and editing. What might your Plan D have been?

Either law or more probably gardening.

What future do you see for dentistry?

More of the same but to a lesser degree because we like sugar too much and we are never going to undertake oral hygiene to a high enough standard. But we are always going to want to look good.

As regards dentistry in general, I would say what has become manifest in the last two or three years and which has contributed to the current recruitment crisis is that young dentists are pretty clear that they don't want to spend their whole lives being dentists. They are looking for a better work/life balance and don't mind earning less to achieve that. That's the biggest change I can see which doesn't necessarily impact on the treatment but does affect the availability of treatment. I feel that's the trend that's going to create the biggest change into the future.

You are incredibly focussed and driven but you always spot opportunities, even those that might seem obtuse to others. How do you manage to marry these different skills? ▶▶

« I think the trick is to be open. This wasn't a quality I fully realised I had until drama school. They advised us that each of us would have ideas – the majority would be ok, some might be brilliant, some dreadful – but what would make them better would be being open to other people's comments and developing them. That legitimised my 'previous' view of the world. Perhaps oddly, I am convinced that this outlook has enabled us to achieve all that we have, and continue to do, with the *BDJ* Portfolio.

I don't feel that in any journal meetings anyone feels inhibited or worried that others might laugh or find their ideas silly. That open culture has allowed us to try lots of things – some work very well, others haven't worked so well but we aren't afraid of failing. In fact I don't think anyone really fails at anything, some things we do just don't turn out how we expected them to. It's a frame of mind.

Once you're open to something the key is to spot what might be the opportunity and focus on that. Someone gave me a very good analogy for this: if you take a jar and

you have a pile of stones and a pile of sand, the stones represent the important things in your life. Put those in the jar first and then pour in the sand to fill up the space around

The *BDJ* is a very rare and precious thing, a commodity that can reflect its time while simultaneously shaping that time. The next editor will emerge to fit the time and the

'I still think people look for the reputation and visibility that comes with publishing in the *BDJ*'

them. You will have some sand left but no stones. If you do it the other way around there isn't any room for the stones! Though it does sometimes mean that you have to make difficult choices: which stones to choose.

God forbid you would ever leave the *BDJ*(!) but if you did, what qualities would you wish to see in the new editor-in-chief?

To be true to themselves. It is a huge privilege. They will only be appointed if they care for the journal and to do that they will have a vision for it. Each editor has had one; each editor has had a different one which has been relevant for their particular time.

journal will evolve in collaboration to achieve the right balance. After so many years the Journal has its own persona; it gives a lot but it takes a lot. ■

References

1. Anonymous. 'This was something that happened to someone else' – an HIV positive dentist explains. *Br Dent J* 2006; **201**: 697-698.
2. Dietrich T, Ower P, Tank M *et al.* Periodontal diagnosis in the context of the 2017 classification system of periodontal diseases and conditions – implementation in clinical practice. *Br Dent J* 2019; **226**: 16-22.
3. Hancocks S A. Nicola Boissard Research Fund. First British research chair in oral biochemistry. *Br Dent J* 1985; **159**: 127-128.
4. YouTube. Let's Go Gardening. A Youtube Gardening Series. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKaA6eDkszf1eu3s2gC01A> (accessed 22 January 2020).

BDJ RESEARCH INSIGHTS FOR ANOTHER VIEW

- Research insights from across the *BDJ* Portfolio
- Providing busy readers with valuable context including article summaries and expert commentary

Catch up here:
<http://bit.ly/BDJResearchInsights>

The graphic features two white silhouettes of human heads facing each other. Inside the heads are various dental-related icons: a tooth, a dental X-ray, a dental chair, a dental handpiece, a dental mirror, and dental pliers. A red dashed line connects the two heads, symbolizing the exchange of ideas and research insights.