

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Alasdair G. Miller

The BDJ Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews.

Information about the editorials in this issue:

Alasdair Miller was installed as the new President of the British Dental Association at the 2014 British Dental Conference and Exhibition held in Manchester on 10–12 April 2014. His presidential address is published below.

2013 BDA President, Barry McGonigle, gave his valedictory address at this year's conference which is also featured below.

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow members of the Association. I'm delighted to welcome you to the BDA Annual Conference and to Manchester. It is a particular pleasure for me as I was born in south Manchester 60 years ago, lived here for the first decade of my life and have great affection for the city. Manchester is a great Victorian city which was renowned for its entrepreneurship and innovations in that era. So it is fitting, I think, that today I will take as my theme how to succeed in a rapidly-changing world, a subject that I intend to explore from historical, current and future perspectives.

HISTORY: My nomination for the Presidency was made by my Branch of the Association, the Western Counties Branch, to whom I am very grateful for the honour. The Branch started in 1879 as the Western Counties Dental Association and therefore slightly pre-dates the BDA itself. The Western Counties Dental Association's first President was Charles Spence-Bate; of whom I will say more later. At the Western Counties inaugural dinner the guest of honour was Sir John Tomes, who you will all know was the first President of the BDA. In 1880 the Association was admitted to the newly-formed British Dental Association as a branch, the second to do so.

Charles Spence-Bate was elected President of the newly formed BDA in 1883. He was a man of many talents, and a Fellow of the Royal Society – a very rare honour for a dentist. He counted Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Joseph Lister amongst his contemporaries in the Royal Society.

Another notable West Country dentist at this time was William Hunt of Yeovil. He was the first dentist in the UK to begin routinely using cocaine as a local anaesthetic in

'Meeting or exceeding patient needs is the essence of good practice...'

1885, having travelled to Boston in the USA the previous year to see it being demonstrated. He was elected President in 1898.

I am the fifth national President to come from the Western Counties. As well as Spence-Bate and William Hunt, Lotan Venning in 1959, and Robert Hunt in 1975, have gone before me. I hope I can live up to the high standards they set.

While researching the Branch history I was interested to note that all of the first three Presidents of the Association – Sir John Tomes, Henry Campion and Charles Spence-Bate – were West Countrymen by birth. All of these members of the profession had enquiring minds, were open to new ideas and strove to make the profession stronger. In doing so they set the tone for an Association that has always promoted learning and development for the benefit of patients and the profession.

PRESENT: It is a very great honour the Association has bestowed on me, electing me to be the 128th President of the Association. I have the privilege of following Barry McGonigle. It is my great pleasure to have known Barry for over 20 years as a fellow former member of the BDA's Representative Board. I was impressed by his logical, common sense approach to problem solving and his ability to communicate complex ideas in a way everyone could clearly understand. Last year, in his inaugural speech, he championed the theme of reducing sugar intake in society to help reduce dental caries. In this he was ahead of the game, as the theme has really come to prominence as an issue in the health debate as his presidential year has gone on.

Barry and I share a number of things in common. Both of us are sons of dentists, and both of our fathers started in general practice around the time NHS dentistry started.

We are also both general practitioners who practise in country towns; Barry in Omagh in Northern Ireland, and myself in Taunton in Somerset.

General practice is very rewarding; especially if one practises in the same area for many years. This allows one to get to know one's patients and their families and see them develop. For me, one of the greatest accolades is when a patient who one treated from childhood enters dental school, perhaps partly because of the influence we may have had on them as patients. The BDA has prompted dentistry as a career for many years and encouraged equality of access to training through its Fair Access policy. Over my career I have seen how this has worked. The diversity of students joining the profession each year is improving. This diversity reflects the changes in society and it is good to know that patients will benefit from it.

I have in my career worked in many areas over the past thirty years in a part-time capacity; hospital practice, dental foundation training, postgraduate education, assisting the establishment of the Peninsula Dental School, and health service management. This has given me an understanding of the issues and pressure each group experiences.

I feel very lucky as these thirty years have been a golden era for dental postgraduate education. I was fortunate to be a trainer on the first VT scheme in the south west; a scheme whose ethos was based on the medical education model established for GMP training by a general medical practitioner, Denis Periera-Gray, who was later to become Professor and then knighted. This set us up in good stead and meant that when Professor Kay, the former BDA Scientific Advisor, started the Peninsula Dental School there was a cohort of enthusiastic GDP

teachers with appropriate education skills. When I retired as Dental Post-graduate Dean for the South West there were seven dental foundation schemes running and a new dental school. The winds of change in the NHS had started to blow.

We are now in a prolonged period of fiscal challenge to all areas of public expenditure and healthcare. No area of dentistry is free from the challenge of delivering care against a backdrop of reductions in funding, increases in costs and increasing consumer demands. It is a time of challenge for new graduates, with increasing tuition fees, high levels of competition for dental foundation training places and a reduced number of associate posts on offer after foundation years are finished. This is an era of difficult decisions for both individual practitioners and the profession as a whole.

Regardless of the difficulties of the era we find ourselves in, the duty of a professional is to put the needs of the patient before oneself. This has never been easy and I think it is becoming even harder now. The profession must balance the need to put the best interests of the patients first, with the imperative to deliver value for money and cope with real terms reductions in budgets. That's no easy proposition. People who are successful in confronting such a challenge are those who can adapt, learn to work differently and act collaboratively with colleagues to generate great results.

General dental practice presents a particularly challenging environment – both within the health service and in private practice. The challenge being that of the need to balance professional ethics with those of running a business. The two are not seen by many as being entirely compatible. If, though, one looks through the history of successful businesses their founders nearly all have the same thing in common. They believed they should try and deliver better services or products to meet the needs of customers. They believed that if they met the needs of their customers in a cost effective way, they would show a profit. Meeting or exceeding patient needs is to me the essence of good ethical practice.

The Association itself has not been immune from these challenges and has itself learned and adapted in recent years. It has introduced

a new representative structure as part of which the Principal Executive Committee was founded and an English Council was born. It has overhauled its membership system, introducing a three-tiered structure. This was a necessary, but nonetheless a brave, step. I have no doubt other professional associations are watching with interest, as they may need to consider doing something similar. As well as addressing the longstanding issue of the sustainability of the Association, the change itself has posed new challenges and the Association has responded to those by evolving its shape and structure. The challenge is, of course, perpetual; responding to members' needs and adapting is a journey that all membership bodies should be on. Continuous learning is a key characteristic of a learning organisation.

FUTURE: Going forward, the challenge for individual practitioners and the profession as a whole will be no less profound than it will for the Association. It is likely in the next few years we will see changes to the NHS dental contract in England and Wales and perhaps Scotland and Northern Ireland. This will require letting go of current working practices and adopting new ones. If one looks back over the history of the profession, those who continue to search out new views and ideas, adapt, and develop new services have survived and prospered. The key to this is having an open, enquiring mind, being able to accept ambiguity, and learning and changing how one thinks and works. This is not always easy because, as professionals, we are taught to base decisions on evidence. Patients require predictable results, and because of that expectation experimentation may not come naturally to us. Sometimes there is little robust evidence to base changes on.

Effective learners are able to generate ideas, explore them, develop options and then weigh them up to come to a decision as to what is likely to be the best route forward. Another attribute of successful learners is the ability to seek out a range of views to assist them in the quest for solutions to problems.

That is where conferences and other professional gatherings, such as BDA Section meetings, where one meets with colleagues, are invaluable. They offer the opportunity to

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discuss and explore ideas in a way that solo learning simply doesn't. The Association provides a forum to hear a variety of views, including those you may not agree with. This I think can be particularly helpful as one is more likely to engage in debate with colleagues whose ideas you do not agree with. It is by such debate that we refine and formulate our ideas. We tend to learn more from those we disagree with, than those with whom we are in close accord.

I hope during my period as your President I will have the chance to visit different areas of the country and parts of the Association to support you in meeting the challenges the profession faces. As I do so, I hope to find a great diversity of views, debate and openness to new ideas. Those are, as I have said, the paving stones on the road to successfully addressing challenges.

I believe this conference is vital to professional success. I hope you will be able to listen to the great lecturers and gain more ideas to make your working lives more interesting and successful. It is a chance to hear many different speakers, on many subjects, perhaps proposing ideas that on first hearing may not be comfortable or to which you are not naturally receptive, but that if listened to with an open mind may improve your professional lives a great deal. It was Winston Churchill who said, 'I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.' Whether we like what we are being taught, or indeed being taught at all, recognising and overcoming our own doubts and preconceptions are vital if we are to gain the most from the vast amount that the conference has to offer us. These three days are a chance to discuss ideas, explore thoughts with colleagues and adapt to cope with the challenges of the profession and the changing demands of society with which we must contend if we are to be successful.

There is a Chinese proverb that says 'Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere'. I urge you to keep that in mind. Victorian Manchester's ideas and innovations travelled far and wide to improve the wider world. I hope this event's learning remains with you in your professional lives long after you have left Manchester. I wish you a stimulating and enjoyable conference.