

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

Barry McGonigle

I have come to the final task as your departing President; reflecting on the year just past as I demit office. I don't need to remind you, I am sure, of the Chinese proverb about 'interesting times'. And I certainly don't need to be reminded of it; it has been the most interesting of years anyone could wish for.

It has been interesting in some challenging ways for the BDA, and many people have worked tirelessly to meet these challenges. And it's been interesting for me in some very pleasant and more straightforward ways, discharging my duty to represent UK dentists both across the UK and internationally. In doing so, I have seen first-hand the respect with which the BDA is regarded by our friends and colleagues at the FDI, in Europe and amongst our fellow national dental associations including the American, Canadian and, of course, Irish dental associations.

I want to focus particularly on my experiences travelling around the UK, during which I was met with unremitting courtesy and friendship. The work and dedication of branch voluntary officers and our staff from the country offices was terrifically impressive. Two occasions particularly stand out. The Scottish Scientific Conference in Glasgow and the CDS Group Conference in Cardiff were both first class events with high quality educational opportunities in settings that enabled dentists and team members to meet and catch up with friends and colleagues whilst learning together.

On the social side I am particularly pleased that I can report that one of the stand-out events of the year was the Northern Ireland branch 90th anniversary gala celebration. The event was held in the Titanic Centre, a landmark piece of architecture in Belfast. I said in my inaugural address last year that it was a particular honour for me to serve as President during the Northern Ireland branch's 90th anniversary year and this event was a crowning moment of

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the celebrations; a complete triumph with almost 300, mostly younger, dentists and colleagues, attending and having a great time. All these events exemplify the reach and range of the BDA's activities across the UK.

I also stressed in my inaugural address the importance of confronting the peril of sugar; that agent of tooth decay that is the scourge of our mission to improve oral health. I revealed in that address that the BDA would be escalating its campaigning on the issue and I am pleased to say that promise has been fulfilled during my Presidential year by the launch of the BDA's 'Make a Meal of it' campaign. Dentists across the UK were issued with posters to display in their practices and encouraged to talk to patients and local retailers, and express their support. And the BDA hasn't only acted alone; it is also co-operating with a number of other health interest groups on wider campaigns to highlight the detrimental impacts on health of sugary food and drink.

The result of all that activity has been a much higher profile for the issue, and the debate has engaged Government ministers, the Chief Medical Officer for England and the World Health Organisation. The glare of the media spotlight on the issue is now so constant that it is rare for a week to go by without seeing coverage of it. The prominence which the issue now has provides a platform for continued lobbying as the UK heads towards a general election next year. While I am under absolutely no illusion about my personal influence in driving the debate, I nonetheless draw some satisfaction from the increased profile it has at the end of my Presidential year, compared to when I gave my inaugural address in London last year.

Some retailers are keen to shut their ears to the importance of the issue of course. That much I learned from the numerous visits to newsgents I have made in the course

of my various travels. One of the by-products of living in the west of Northern Ireland and carrying out the role of national President throughout the UK is that you must spend a lot of time travelling and indeed even more time waiting for flights or trains and so on.

Much time has been spent hanging around in airports, but occasionally the schedule offers a free morning or afternoon and I get to do something more self-indulgent. On one of my trips to London, I had a free afternoon and visited the Victoria & Albert Museum. There, whiling away my spare moments, I stumbled upon the very impressive jewellery collection. Tucked into the middle of a display case of rings, I found a gold ring bearing a charm which it is claimed wards off 'toothache and storms at sea'. A fascinating combination of perils! I have already perused the exhibition hall quickly this morning and I noticed a distinct absence of such useful devices for sale. This does rather suggest that one of the manufacturers might be missing an opportunity for a bulk sale to the Royal Navy and cruise liner operators.

Given the rarity of this ring, I very much doubt if the V&A would lend such a prize to the BDA museum, but perhaps as we begin a new BDA year with our conference here in Manchester, we should all hope that the charm of that ring will inspire the BDA to a smoother passage through the challenges and endeavours that lie ahead. I am sure that everyone here will join me in doing so.

I wish to finish by extending my sincere thanks to some of the outstanding individuals without whom this year would have been immeasurably more difficult: the incomparable Alison Magee at the BDA, without whom I could not have fulfilled even half my duties, and my wife Finola and the super team of really great people back in the practice without whose help and support I could never have done it.