

GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT Roger Matthews

One consequence, it seems to me, of omitting any substantial mention of what might be termed “the business of dentistry” from the undergraduate curriculum, is that it helps to create an ever-expanding market for guidance, advice, coaching or “management consultancy” in the graduate market.

Imagine a solicitor, accountant or plumber setting up in business without a thorough understanding of what the world of commerce is all about. Perhaps it is an understandable omission, as for many years – certainly since 1948 – the possession of a dental degree has almost been the nearest thing to a guarantee of lifetime security, not to say comparative affluence, since Croesus was a lad.

This perception of the value of odontological knowledge has perhaps waned a bit, but we are still told that applications to dental schools run at a greater multiplier of available places than almost any other discipline (vets excepted).

And so, in these days of CPD available from every conceivable source, be it face to face, on-line, via magazines and journals, blended learning or whatever, there is a never-ending supply of students awaiting the handing down of knowledge and advice on how to prosper even more.

I was captivated by the summary of a forthcoming presentation on Succeeding in Dental Practice (or some such) which promised, among other things to “eliminate all competition permanently”. I wondered (being unable to attend this lecture) whether this implied hiring hit-men, maybe poisoning local colleagues, or, more expansively, taking over the government?

It reminded me of the time, many years ago when I was only a dental toddler, when I was overcome with awe at the commercial promises made by a leading business consultant to the profession. Unlike my contemporaries in the audience, I was too busy dealing with a young family to take up the offer of a free initial counselling session.

It was only some years later that I heard the stories of practices expanded beyond their reasonable profitability base, partners set against one another in the pursuit of impossible objectives and, in several cases, physical and financial meltdown.

There are, of course, a good number of sound and wise advisors around, who can take dentists to a more fulfilling and prosperous future. But then again, there are those who seem to have come to believe their own publicity flyers. And I still hear of skilful and caring practitioners who are led down flower-strewn, but ultimately doomed paths – usually shelling out substantial fees along the way.

So, I am not arguing that students should learn at dental school about the detailed intricacies of accountancy, marketing and management. But they should – either at undergraduate or foundation stages – be given sufficient knowledge to sift out the promises from the pretences, the solutions from the snake-oil.

There are some good and experience-based texts on the bookshelves, by eminent and time-served practitioners. There should be more, but sadly most successful dentists are rightly concentrated on their own interests (and authorship is not that rewarding in the financial sense, anyway). Those titles acknowledged as sound should be required learning.

It has become a cliché to say that “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is”, but that is still good advice, none the less. When I look at dentists’ websites or practice booklets, some of those seem to fall into that category too. But while you can fool some of the people some of the time, eventually time itself runs out.

That all-time great golfer, Jack Nicklaus, took constant advice from a trusted coach. People said: “Why on earth, with your success and skill, do you need a coach, Jack?” His reply was simple: “To remind me of the basics.” We all need that reminder, from our earliest days in dentistry and throughout our career.

Notes to Editors:

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Roger joined Denplan in 1995 having spent 20 years working in general dental practice and as a dento-legal advisor for the Medical Defence Union. He oversees dental advice to the company and its links with professional bodies, and is responsible for Denplan's professional services.