

PHASE SHIFT
Roger Matthews

Life, it has been said, is an incurable condition. And it's true that in the widest sense there is only one finality.

I'm sorry if you've started to read this column over your breakfast cornflakes or your mid-morning coffee and are not therefore really placed to delve into profundity right now, but don't worry, it gets easier.

What set my mind working was the concept of "Final BDS". For many of you reading this, there will be an immediate flashback, even if it was many years ago (as in my case). Maybe it's a recollection of the impossible *viva-voce* question, the operative dentistry case that oh-so-nearly exposed the pulp, or the celebratory drink down at the pub.

For those of you who work alongside someone who did "Final BDS", bear in mind that this was, alongside the birth of their first-born or falling in love for the first time, a life-changing event. It has, as they say, resonance.

At one time, final BDS meant just that. It was, in effect, a 40-year licence to practise the science and art of dentistry in all its glorious complexity. It came at the end of several years hard slog, when we all thought long and hard about maybe going into merchant banking (some of us wish we had, but that's another story).

Those times have changed and dentistry in the past few years has been undergoing a true 'phase shift' in terms of alignment with the world outside our profession.

No longer is the possession of a degree (along with professional indemnity) effectively a lifetime guarantee of work, respect or pretty much anything. The world now demands more from everyone, whether they are a self-employed professional or a cubicle-bound call centre worker.

The pace of change is so swift now that everything goes into a sort of accelerating path. Whether we look at healthcare, commerce or law, the rules seem to change faster than we can take the information on board.

So what is now demanded is not merely responsibility but accountability on an ever-changing scale, and we are measured by how well we are keeping up. CQC is just one phenomenon in this global whirlpool.

I have been asked this week why, for instance, in a dental practice team of three, there should need to be an appraisal policy, or why staff and patient feedback is really important. My first answer is that to be effective in whatever we do, we need feedback, encouragement and goals.

I am appraised, and expect to be, on a regular basis. My team and I expect to be exposed to feedback on a daily basis, both formal and informal. Without these tools I am no more aware of my effectiveness and progress than a sailor deprived of his charts and GPS unit.

What has changed is not dentistry or the world – they are both changing together and change is about the only thing I can predict with any certainty about tomorrow or next week.

Revalidation is the next thing that will occupy our professional minds – though with a little more notice, it seems, than the current round of regulation afflicting dentists in England. I urge everyone to respond to the GDC's consultation paper and to consider carefully how they want their profession to be in a decade's time, when it is a reality. What is it that we can genuinely show to our peers and our patients in the twenty first century that might help to recover some of the trust that, as a group, we seem to have lost over the past twenty years?

In a sense, the statistics from the defence organisations and Fitness to Practise hearings are feedback of the most 'constructive' kind. Sadly it's not the kind of feedback that any of us want to hear, but if we are going to do anything about it, I don't think we will achieve our intended results by blaming the media, the government or the regulators. We have to do it ourselves.

[673 words]

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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.