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FJ Trevor Burke

The changing face of dentistry?

It is generally interesting to attend dental meetings (the numbers of these seemingly increasing year on year) and to get a feel for the *raison d'être* behind the meeting. Of course there are meetings of societies, and then there are conferences run by companies which have no dental background, perhaps with the only reason why such

conferences exist being to make a profit for the organizer. I attended one such meeting earlier this year and took the opportunity to wander around the trade show. I categorized the stands roughly into clinical (manufacturers of materials, and laboratories), para-clinical (dental equipment, sterilization, instruments and CQC advice, for example) business and educational, with my calculations indicating around 25% of the stands to be clinical, almost 40% dedicated to para-clinical, 10% to be educationally-oriented, and around 25% to be business-oriented. I know that dental practices have to operate as small businesses and therefore have to operate on an effective financial footing in order to make a living for those who work in them, so the proportion of floor space devoted to the business of dentistry was not a surprise. However, what amazed me was the openness with which the words 'branding', 'maximizing marketing', 'cutting edge marketing', 'maximizing growth', 'increasing profits', 'seeing fewer patients/making more money', 'maximizing your treatment plan acceptance', and so forth, were used. I realize that there is an excellent exposition of marketing in dentistry by Martin Kelleher in the present issue, with special reference to cosmetic dentistry, but I wonder if these phrases would have been used in a dental context a decade ago – certainly not two decades ago? What seemed to be missing in all of this hype was the need to provide quality care for patients. It is my view that if this is done, and the fee structure of the practice is along the right lines, the profitability of the practice will take care of itself. I worry sometimes (and in discussing this with others, know that they feel the same) that increasingly people seem to become dentists simply because they see it as a means of making money – joining a business rather than joining a healthcare profession. The only way for a dentist to 'improve his/her credibility' is not by cutting edge marketing, but by providing excellence in care for his/her patients, with those happy patients then becoming evangelists for the practice where they have been well looked after. I wonder if questionable methods for improving treatment plan acceptance results in patients who regret undertaking a treatment plan and are later sorry, so sorry that increasing numbers are seeking redress by visiting a lawyer.

Dentistry has survived as a profession in the UK for around a century, but its days may be numbered if it becomes more widely viewed as a business rather than being a healthcare profession.

Footnote: an interesting research project might be to chart the number of trade stands at exhibitions and conferences, year on year, to determine whether the business side of dentistry is overtaking the clinical side.

All articles published in Dental Update are subject to review by specialist referees in the appropriate dental disciplines.