

Aren't we all dental care professionals? A student's perspective



The concept of how dental care could be improved through new and innovative ways of working and better use of skills mix is one that has been at the core of a number of debates in recent years. To introduce students to this discussion and get younger professionals thinking about potential solutions, the Association of Dental Groups (ADG) launched a new Award at this year's Bursary Awards 2018: 'Innovation in Dental Care'.

The winner was fourth year student at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, James Coughlan, for his ideas shared in his essay, 'Aren't we all Dental Care Professionals?: Could restructuring the dental team improve care whilst making NHS dentistry more sustainable?' In his article, James explored the current role of dental hygienists and therapists, why further reform is needed, potential barriers and possible solutions that might help benefit all involved.

"It started off as a project at University in which we were required to write a mini-dissertation; mine was on the topic of skill mix in dental care provision," he explains, "but it's also a topic I've been interested in for a while now. In particular the developments that have taken place regarding the Advancing Dental Care Education and Training Review to identify the skills and composition of the future dental workforce. Thus, when my tutor approached me about turning my paper – which was originally very scientific and analytical – into an opinion piece exploring the issue in more depth, I was really keen to give it a go.

"I found that the longer I spent thinking about it, the more my thoughts on the matter evolved and the more I realised that with some changes, there truly is huge potential to make a difference to dental provision. What I hadn't anticipated when I started the essay was that I would start looking at potential new models of care, going beyond what is available at the moment. What I postulated within the essay wasn't entirely original; but rather built on existing ideas and research, bringing them together to create a more finished proposal, but in doing so I explored what could be a possible alternative to the NHS as we know it now. That is a system whereby the dentist acts as a clinical director and direct access is allowed – more how the Netherlands does it.

"I believe this model has the potential to solve a number of the current issues simultaneously, by creating more of a team environment, improving morale and creating a system of meaningful feedback for dental hygienists and therapists (DHTs). For dentists, overseeing multiple DHTs may also allow a mental break from the minutiae of the more technical work required of them, helping to relieve some of the stress from what would otherwise be a more intense job.

“Looking ahead, I hope to develop my ideas further and get more involved in the wider discussion surrounding the utilisation of the whole dental team to improve patient care as the Advancing Dental Care Review moves forward. There is still a lot of work to be done, especially in regards I think to how the issues are approached and arguments are framed, as there’s still a lot of tension on both sides. As for the profession, it is my hope that all involved in providing dental care will work together to form a more united front over the coming months and years. Because as it currently stands, there does seem to be the perception – at least from my experience, anyway – that restructuring the dental team would be devaluing the dentist and their role within the practice. I don't believe this has to be the case at all. The way I see it, it’s about working together to come up with a solution for the whole team to collaborate more effectively to improve working conditions as well as treatment outcomes for the patient.”

But for now, how does James feel about winning the Award? “Winning the ‘Innovation in Dental Care’ category has been a great honour and also hugely beneficial in terms of networking with peers and meeting like-minded individuals who are as similarly interested in finding innovative ways to improve the provision of dental care,” he says.

“At University it’s very easy to concentrate all of your energy on how to be the best clinician, but I think taking a step back and looking at some of the wider issues that the profession faces is also important – and that’s why competitions such as the ADG Bursary Awards are so crucial. We’re students now, but in three or four years time we won’t be; we need to be prepared for what awaits us.”

For more information about the ADG visit www.dentalgroups.co.uk