

A Closer Look at the Public Perception of U.K. Dental Professionals

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The mention of the word *dentist* can still send shudders down the spines of many; an estimated 12 percent of U.K. dentate patients suffer from extreme dental anxiety.¹ The media's representation of the profession doesn't do us great favours; characters such as Stuart Price from *The Hangover* and Ben Harper from the BBC sitcom *My Family* spring to mind.

Whilst we can't expect modern media to drastically shift, it's important for us to consider how we are perceived to the general public because it has a huge bearing on the trust they place in us.

Thankfully, the days of barber surgeons tormenting the mouths of terrified patients are in the past and the profession has made huge strides in developing painless procedures that are tolerable to most patients. However, the archetypal image of the clinician in a white lab coat is a convention that requires an update alongside the clinical developments that have occurred over the past decades.

Professionalism is a key element to the service we provide; it ensures that patients will be cared for with the utmost discretion and to the highest standard achievable. Whilst this is an important factor to consider, the human element of health care is often overlooked, which can make us appear withdrawn and less relatable.

As a patient, you'd want to know that your dentist is someone you can confide in whilst still exhibiting a dependable level of clinical knowledge. You'd also want a dentist who upholds his clinical duties, has emotional resilience and who goes out of his way to ensure you are cared for.

Almost 60 percent of patients said the most important element of deciding a dental practice was the recommendation from peers.² Recommendations are derived from good rapport with patients, which includes presenting ourselves in the

most approachable manner possible. It's easy for us to be engrossed in the clinical world of dentistry and immerse ourselves in the multitude of events our colleagues hold, but it's essential to remember that there's an entire world outside of this bubble. Integrating our profession with the wider community has the potential to alleviate the stereotypes patients may have regarding their dentists.

Social media has proven to be effective in doing this, as demonstrated by Dr. Milad Shadrooh, better known as the 'Singing Dentist,' who integrates oral health messages into viral videos that engage thousands worldwide. And yet an online search of the word *dentist* often produces results promoting a particular treatment or technology which is often of no interest to the general public. Instead, we should look to promote our creative endeavours, as a means of identifying with people in a realm beyond our practices.

Beyond improving the perception of our profession, having an outlet of expression is crucial in such a demanding career. Dr. Laura-Jane Smith, a respiratory doctor in Northeast London, recently published an article in the *Guardian* in which she 'thought [her] career as a doctor was over. It was the arts that save[d] [her].'³ This was an example of how the strenuous responsibility of caring for patients took its toll on a clinician, but creative outlets gave her the escape required to overcome such difficulties. Remember that dentistry is a performance within itself; effectively encouraging your patients to implement the advice that you give them is the cornerstone of effective treatment. This was one of the many reasons that I decided to form a Rap Society at King's College London, alongside my colleagues Zayd Mehdi and Nickil Dhokia.

Society has given students the platform

to express themselves in a supportive, nonjudgmental environment. The society now has more than 60 members, studying various degrees from maths to management, who collaborate on events such as workshops, cyphers and listening sessions.

When we founded the society, though, we were met with much surprise that a group of three dental students would consider creating a group that would extend beyond the field of dentistry. There are a multitude of dental-related groups amongst the dental schools in the U.K., all of which have their merits, but it's not as common to see students involve themselves in leading societies unrelated to their degrees. The reasons for this are unclear; perhaps it could be due to a lack of extra-curricular time from the demands of the degree or a lack of interest, but it may be worth extending our accessibility to the wider student community.

Ultimately, there aren't enough dentists as a whole in the public eye that pursue causes that appeal to the wider public, thus leading to the misinformed stereotypes mentioned at the beginning of this article. Performing arts are simply an example of a cause that dentists can pursue; there are talents that many of us possess that deserve greater exposure for our personal and professional good. Beyond the benefits to our dental careers, we have an obligation to ourselves to have an outlet of expression for our own wellbeing. ■

References:

1. Nuttall et al., 2009 - 8: Access and barriers to care - a report from the Adult Dental Health Survey 2009
2. BDTA Dental Survey 2012
3. Laura Jane-Smith - <https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2017/mar/30/thought-career-doctor-over-arts-saved-me>