The Dental Student: Paradox or Paragon?

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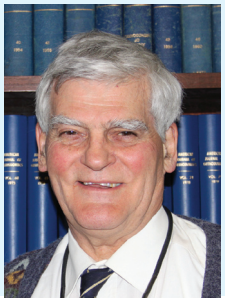

The vitality of the profession rests in each succeeding crop of graduates, an injection of youthful vigour and enthusiasm which the Schools are proud to contribute to the country each year. Emerging from the rigours of the demanding dental curriculum, our new colleagues are eager to embrace the profession and to put their hard won expertise to work. That many may find it difficult to enjoy the full spectrum of treatment possibilities in Community Service is a passing problem, for the future beckons with wider options.

Too fanciful, too idealistic? Casting our students as *paragons* of virtue? Perhaps, but the truth is that there are classes at our Schools approaching the final hurdle and now looking beyond student days ready to assume greater responsibilities, BUT could this year be one facing possible impediments to graduation? There has been talk and plans at high levels in South African academic circles regarding the deferment of examinations and of graduation. It may be possible that dental graduands are affected. An additional burden of stress on already laden shoulders?

Much has been written about the stress of studying Dentistry. The course is recognised as one of the most challenging amongst all University curricula. In 2015 the JOURNAL published an in depth study of stress levels amongst students at The University of the Western Cape.[1] Based on the analysis of a 78% response to a questionnaire the study found that levels of stress increased over the years of the course, peaking in Fourth Year. Major stressors were identified, and consistently appearing as a significant influence was the fear of failing. Whilst such apprehension is seen and felt by students as a most personal emotion, it is well to recognise that the Institution also views failures with dismay, the intention always being to successfully produce well trained, confident new practitioners. Both students and staff have been exposed to additional stress these past weeks as Universities were engulfed by student activism.

And that has been a most potent force through past and present times. Student activism has a long history. France lead the way in the 13th century when students challenged social and academic issues, but Korea was not long in following suit when in 1519, students demonstrated against the King. In general, student strikes and marches have been markedly successful in achieving defined objectives. Those objectives have been varied in the extreme, political clashes and factional feuds have beset Universities in Bangladesh, Communism has been supported and opposed by students. Nuclear Disarmament, benefits for disadvantaged populations, attacks on the existence of disparate levels of society, health care delivery for all, have featured as causes for activism on Western campuses. There have been many instances when student demonstrations have indeed influenced Government policies. Opposition to the Vietnam War, issues of racism, freedom of the press have all attracted the attention of student leaders. Pertinent to the current South African status is the realisation that in the UK, a 2010 eruption of student protests was raised against, you guessed it, tuition fees!

In all these actions, students have shown commitment, resourcefulness and resolution. Dental and Medical student participation, however, sincere though intentions may have been, appears to have been muted, as a result of clinical commitments and overall work load. To that extent, the epithet *paragons* may be applicable. Students have shown commendable professional responsibility, BUT therein is also the element of *paradox*, student empathies and sympathies constrained by the very values being challenged by others.

The JOURNAL carries this month a pertinent paper. An in depth study reports an assessment of just how effective is the management of emergency pulpotomies at one of the South African schools. The outcome is not encouraging and one conclusion is that there should be an expansion of dental services in the urban areas. The role of the School must then be to continue to produce graduates, even in the event of student activism bringing classes to a halt. Students are facing year end and perhaps Final Assessments within a few weeks. The sincere wish of the Association is that the students shall have the opportunity to be *paragons*, to devote themselves to the required tasks and to relish the elation of success. These will be the professionals who will carry forward some of the ideas recorded in this JOURNAL. It is they who may realise the glittering promises of stem cells, will strive for enhancement of endodontics, will experience the stimulation of research. But first they must graduate.

Is it a *paradox* that tacit support may be given to the lofty ideals of student activism whilst at the same time trusting that sound ethical principles will reign and that a new echelon of dental graduates will confidently be released to help manage the challenges of dental and oral disease?

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