Caroline Holland reports from the tenth anniversary Dental Law and Ethics Forum

Changes in the processes, culture and tone of the profession’s regulator, the General Dental Council, were laid bare by the outgoing Chief Executive and Registrar, Duncan Rudkin, in a frank and illuminating talk to the Dental Law and Ethics Forum, currently marking its tenth anniversary.

Just two weeks before his departure from the General Dental Council (GDC) and taking up his new role with the General Pharmaceutical Council, Mr Rudkin looked back on his 11 years with the council. He analysed critically the approach the GDC had taken in the past. ‘Sometimes we might have appeared to give the impression that we must protect the public from the profession, and that would be a big mistake.’

This valuable insight was partly attributable, he said, to former GDC member, Joe Rich, and that ‘his professionalism as a seminal moment, told Duncan, who, in what turned out to be a former GDC member, Joe Rich, partly attributable, he said, to and that would be a big mistake.’

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Mind over matter

Fitness to Practise, or disciplinary issues, came into the category of things that keep him awake at night, he said. ‘How can a regulator work effectively and fairly to deal with the small number of rogues and villains without sucking into the system those who are not rogues and villains but maybe having a bad day or an unfortunate set of circumstances?’

He said the GDC need to make Fitness to Practise a more efficient and cost-effective process and the Council was committed to undertaking a systematic review to achieve these ends. In answer to a question on the Dental Complaints Service, Duncan replied: ‘We don’t pretend it’s an independent body because it isn’t, we are accountable for it.’ He went on to say that he had naively thought the complaints service would reduce the number of conduct cases, but rather than taking a slice of the cake, it looked as if it made the cake bigger.

His review of the changing nature of dental regulation began with a moment in 1998, soon after he joined the Council when it banned, with immediate effect, the provision of General Anaesthesia in dental practices.

It would be inconceivable today, he said, that such a change could take place without consultation, but that was the culture of the time. ‘In 1998, when the GDC did things in a high handed fashion for the best and know what the best was, we did not have “stakeholders”.

He added: ‘When I arrived in Wimpole Street, I felt as if the outside world was dentists waiting to be told what to do and that was it! Now, he said, there was a danger that the pace of consultation to which it was committed could paralyse the GDC and that there needed to be a balance.

A little disappointment?

He reflected on the changes brought by the addition of a register for Dental Care Professionals (DCPs), expressing the opinion that the registration of DCPs might have led to some disappointed expectations for some, if they had thought of registration as principally there for the benefit of professionals, which it was not.

He admitted that the GDC changed its tone when publicising the new register for DCPs. Initially the benefits of registration were promoted, but this gave the impression that it was optional whereas it is irrevocable. He pointed out that this was a generational change – given the number of young people who were grandfathered onto the register.

He continued: “The relationship between the professional team and the patient is a special one to which the regulator is not a party and it seems to me that our role as regulator is as much as anything about facilitating or underpinning professionals themselves in providing protection.”

The GDC’s decision to appoint a new role as regulator is as much as anything about concentrating their efforts on their job and maybe not so much on managing their reputations.

In the questions after the session, Chris Morris, President of the DLEF, observed that he had enjoyed a “seminal moment” when some years ago, Duncan told him that his favourite definition of professionalism was: “Doing the right thing when no-one is looking.”

Chris told the meeting that no other DLEF speaker had ever been invited back, but Duncan had been invited back twice, a reflection of the important role he had enjoyed in the dental world.

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