The good old days?

With fewer quality systems and employment laws in place, working as a dental nurse in the 1970s was a lot easier. But were things really as good as they seemed at the time? Jane Armitage reminisces

When I was asked by the Editor of Dental Tribune to consider writing a monthly column it was suggested that I write topics on various subjects that you the readers would find interesting. With this in mind, I’ve decided to look back and reminisce at my own career, hoping some of you will feel compelled to share your own memories with me.

I left school at the age of 15 with no qualifications. I didn’t want to continue with any further education – I felt I had served my time and now I wanted the money. After all, at 15 you know it all, or at least you think you do at the time.

My initial chosen career was to be a train announcer, I could visualise myself saying in my Northern accent: ‘The train arriving at Platform 5 is the 6.20pm to Llanfairpwllgwyn-gyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch.’ So off I went to our local railway station to request an application form. After listening to my request for a form I was flatly told ‘sorry we only take people who have a mobility disability as this is a seated job.’

Hang on, where was the Equal Opportunities Policy when I needed it? The fact was, I was flattered to hear we only take people who have a mobility disability as this is this a seated job.

Talking to the landlady at our boarding house, she asked me what did I want to do. I said I had no idea, and she went on to tell me about her daughter who had been working as a dental nurse in the local practice and how much she loved it. This inspired me to try dentistry. But being a child, leaving my dad to explain? Dentists, extractions and Jane didn’t go together.

Nevertheless, I applied to local dental practice for the position of trainee dental nurse. The pay was £4.50 per week. I had arrived. I was loaded, until my mother mentioned the word “board”. Suddenly my pay was reduced to £5 a week and all the years of being fed and supported came to a halt. I had to pay to live and what a shock to the system it was – as if working wasn’t enough!

A natural talent

Surprisingly, I took to the job like a duck to water; I loved every minute of surgery work. As it is now, every day was varied. I spent my time charting, working chairside, sterilising instruments in either Dettol or boiling water, I didn’t wear gloves or eye protection, maintaining the aspirator bottle by emptying it down the drain, cleaning the bottle by hand, collecting blood and saliva on a paper towel, to name a few.

We worked hard, but when you look back, exactly what did we have in place? Where were the quality systems then? The Health & Safety Act 1974 had not yet been introduced, and neither had COSHH which came later in 1988.

Failing health

It was during the first 18 months of my dental nursing that I became ill. I started to have seizures that were diagnosed as Petit Mal Epilepsy. My surgery life was over, as the hospital tried to get my medication right.

I continued to work though, but now as a receptionist.

Gone were the days I would work alongside the dentist I had become attached to. Working alongside him was a story in itself. I was frightened to death of him and I quite often received a smack on the hand while nursing, usually for doing something I was unaware of, but I enjoyed the experience all the same.

Gone were the days I would watch as he accidently caught his patient’s toupee on the end of the high-speed drill, sending it whizzing around and around, before placing it back on the patient’s head back to front, as he apologised profusely. Oh, how I miss the 1970s surgery days.

My illness finally took over and I had to leave dentistry, until the time came when I was fully controlled by medication. The Disability Act was introduced in 1975, which I could have done with earlier as I had already been sacked from one position for being epileptic.

The moral of this article is to give a little insight into how I became involved in practice management, and how the limitation of employment law has affected my own life. Were they really the good old days? Perhaps this is something we can discuss another day.

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