A global community

Dental Tribune talks to Dentalghar founder Raman Bedi about his new online forum for dentists originating from the Indian sub-continent, and collaboration with Smile-On

Dentalghar is a new worldwide community for dentists of Indian origin

Prof Bedi, could you please tell our readers a little bit about your background and why you got involved in dentistry?

My parents were part of the large migration from India to the UK that occurred in the late 50s and 60s. They had little experience of higher education and so my brothers and I entered university life with very little background information or guidance as to what subjects we should choose. It was also at a time when professional career advice was hard to obtain. Thus, I drifted into dentistry with very little understanding about what to expect. Despite this somewhat disadvantageous position, I loved my time at Bristol Dental School and have never regretted the choice I made to study dentistry.

You were Chief Dental Officer (CDO) for the UK from 2002 to 2005. What are you doing at the moment?

I consider my time spent as CDO a real privilege and loved the job, but have also never looked back. I knew that I would be a paediatric dentist from my second undergraduate year. At the time, Reg Andlaw was head of the children’s department and was to me, in his quiet way, very inspiring. I also remember writing to David Barnes, then head of the oral health unit at WHO (Geneva), asking him for a job. He was kind enough to take the time to respond and pointed out that if this was a career option then I should gain postgraduate qualifications and about 20 years experience before applying to WHO!

This was quite a significant feedback for a 21-year-old dental student.

And so, 25 years or so later when asked to be CDO (England), I was thrilled and keen to meet the challenge, but in 2006 when the opportunity came for me to lead the Global Child Dental Health Taskforce, whose mission is supported by the WHO, the choice was simple. I am now living out the dream I had at the start of my career and this is a very satisfying and fulfilling role.

The current CDO, Barry Cockcroft, recently said in an interview with Dental Tribune UK that public dentistry has significantly improved in Britain. Do you agree with him?

It is not easy to be a public figure and a spokesperson for Government policy. There are deep-rooted constraints and few in the profession understand the extent of these, Barry is doing a good job.

You are also the founder of Dentalghar, a new worldwide community for dentists of Indian origin. What is the purpose behind this organisation?

It is simply responding to a global movement that is occurring within the Indian Diaspora. I was born in India but my parents migrated when I was two. Like myself, there is a large community whose physical links with the subcontinent were severed but not the emotional ones. There is a saying in India: “You can take someone out of India but you can never take India out of them”. I noticed that our medical colleagues were organising themselves and linking up with their counterparts in India. They have established joint ventures, conferences and collaborative training opportunities. In dentistry, proportionately speaking, we have more (worldwide) dentists of Indian origin than our medical colleagues and so this factor gave rise to the moment for starting dentalghar. It is if you will, a response to a need.

Let me also say at this stage that everyone is welcome to join this virtual community irrespective of race, ethnic background, religion or gender – in fact we would welcome a multifaceted community. The focus is on the Indian sub-continent (Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka), but also the diverse “Asian” dental communities which have sprung up in countries as far apart as US, Canada, UK, South Africa, Singapore, Middle East, Australia, and the
list goes on wherever peoples of Indian origin have settled.

We are creating a platform on which to bring together many groups into one global community. There is no set agenda which one has got to buy into. It is simply an arena to meet and discuss issues, but also to create opportunities whereby many of us outside India can think about how we can give something back to our country of origin. I don’t know where this will take us – but it is full of exciting prospects and an opportunity to engage.

Your partner in this project is Smile-on, a UK-based provider of dental education. What is their part in this?

I can just about navigate around my PC by myself but after that I am out of my depth. This is a virtual community engaging on the internet. I needed to have partners who had IT expertise but also understood the dental market and publishing. Smile-on has this combination and I had worked with the company before so it was an obvious choice for me to team up with them.

Is the organisation helping dentists from India with work permits, visas, etc?

The organisation is not a campaigning one. We are simply bringing people together and if certain issues come up then members might want to respond as individuals. As I mentioned earlier, there is no fixed agenda.

Work permits are not being discussed by members. What I notice is that many dentists are asking how they can help or volunteer in India. Others are re-connecting with their roots, that is towns where their families originated from, and asking what dentistry is like there. So in fact, the interest is reversed and directed towards India.

How many dentists of Indian origin are currently working abroad and in which countries?

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