Taking the plunge
Ken Harris takes the first steps towards gaining an MSc

Along with the news of my upcoming 50-year reunion came the realisation that I am actually in the twilight of my career, much to my children’s glee, and their regular quips about my advancing years (and receding hairline) seem all the more appropriate these days. Should I go gently into that good night or should I try to raise the enthusiasm to rage a little more against the dying of the light?

One thing I’ve learned after 50 years in dentistry is everyone’s an expert. The advent of the evidence-based dentistry movement, possibly driven by government and perhaps fuelled by dry-fingered academics (OK, I’m prepared to concede moist) has often been given short shrift by the army of general practitioners such as myself who is working in the ultimate “in vivo” laboratory. After all, we’ve all been there and done that, even if for many of us the T-shirt no longer fits.

It is a truth universally acknowledged (at least by wet-fingered dentists) that an academic dental colleague in possession of a “learned” opinion must be in need of a soap box. Equally, when the strident views of general dentists, often determined by hard-won personal experience in years of practice, are voiced (who mentioned soap box?) the cry of “show me the evidence” is equal valid when our academic colleagues choose to cross swords with us.

I have always been suspicious of dogma from either side and have an infinite capacity for doubt; I blame my Irish-Catholic Liverpool background, but my long-suffering family just call me a grumpy old man. However, I’m still passionate about my profession, and I’m always looking for new knowledge I can use. But who can we trust? I was once told the half-life of a dental fact is five years, and how many of these dental facts are driven by commercial interests?

I’m currently on holiday, and when I boarded the plane I was bombarded by posters from a well-known high street bank, (and we think we have an image problem) urging the public to consider the world of opportunity out there. Using an example about Holland exports (although I’m lost as to what relevance the fact that Holland exports more soy sauce than Japan has), one piece of advice caught my eye. Tucked away at the bottom of the poster was the suggestion that we need to invest in education in order to be ready for the new opportunities coming our way. Hmmm…

Hallowed path
My academic career was stopped in its tracks back in 1982 when my application for a house job at Newcastle Dental Hospital was unceremoniously rejected, and I went straight into practice instead. There was no vocational training in those days. I had given up any thoughts I would ever tread the hallowed academic path when I discovered a whole load of “interesting” stuff on the internet and it seemed that post graduate education was available online. I have never seen the attractions of technology for technology’s sake, preferring the more intellectual pursuits of a good book or a stimulating conversation (or so I tell myself) and my usual scepticism held me back. But I soon discovered that you could sign up for an MSc in almost any branch of dentistry with guaranteed success if you had both a pulse and a credit card (with the latter being most important).

Two years ago I first noticed the MSc in restorative and aesthetic dentistry at the University of Manchester; a highly renowned establishment. I was looking for a course with serious aspiration and the confidence in itself to challenge its delegates; I was also looking for a universit with the courage to set the bar high enough to gain respect within the academic community at large! After a possibility of opportunity out there. Using an example about Holland exports (although I’m lost as to what relevance the fact that Holland exports more soy sauce than Japan has), one piece of advice caught my eye. Tucked away at the bottom of the poster was the suggestion that we need to invest in education in order to be ready for the new opportunities coming our way. Hmmm…

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