

Be that voice

The role of dentists in advocating for patients was reinforced in multiple sessions at BSPD's 2021 annual conference hosted by the Merseyside branch and chaired by specialist in paediatric dentistry, Dr Clare Ledingham. Whether in the context of food manufacturing practices and marketing or the care and management of vulnerable children, dentists can and should lobby for change.

In the first session, a Sugar Summit, three expert panellists discussed diet, obesity and food marketing from very different perspectives. First on the virtual platform was Dr Alison Tedstone, Chief Nutritionist at the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, who provided valuable background on UK food policy.

She described how in 2016 the government launched its obesity strategy, resulting in the levy on soft drinks. Targets (1) were set to reduce the sugar content of food by 20% but a disappointing reduction of only 3% has been achieved to date. The sugar content of breakfast cereals, drinks and yoghurts has decreased but the sugar content of confectionary has increased. "As dentists you are well placed to call for things to be better," she said.

Dr Emma Boyland and Professor Amandine Garde, both based at the University of Liverpool, were the two other speakers on the panel. Their presentations demonstrated how food marketing, product placement and advertising infringed children's right to a healthy start in life.

The UK may be small but we have the third largest market in the world in terms of digital marketing, behind only the USA and China, said Dr Boyland. While unhealthy products are regulated here, brands are not. Dr Boyland demonstrated how advertising for big brands - a global fast food chain and a sparkling drink conglomerate for example - depict healthy lifestyle imagery to sell inherently unhealthy products.

Professor Amandine Garde continued on the corporate theme saying that industry strategy was to delay or annul regulation of food products by invoking legal argument. A report (2) from European Consumer Organisations, which she initiated, demonstrates how children are being targeted by unhealthy food advertising, undermining their human rights.

Making an impassioned case for change, Professor Garde said children should be protected from diet-related disease and a government led response to the marketing of unhealthy foods was warranted.

The ensuing discussion was no less fascinating, with many delegates asking questions leading to a lively debate on what could be learned from the handling of tobacco marketing which led to a successful reduction in cigarette smoking.

Next up was a session with the theme of vulnerable children featuring two Charlotte Waites, one a community dentist and Chair of the British Dental Association England Community Dental Services Committee and the other a Director of a Mental Health

Charity in Wales and their presentations were complemented by a talk from Developmental Paediatrician Aideen Naughton.

Dr Charlotte Waite (the dentist) explored the battle to advocate for children and families who suffer inequalities. She concluded her talk in rousing fashion by thanking BSPD members for what they do to advocate for children, highlighting that with an emerging new Health Bill, dentists will need to be vocal for the profession and for patients.

She urged her audience to be that voice, saying: “Keep speaking up, keep being the person who says “yes, but, what about” and be that person who represents those unheard voices. Together we can make sure that dentistry is not the missing piece in the healthcare puzzle.”

The final keynote session of conference was The Sights and Sounds of Childhood and the speakers were Dr Hannah Barham-Brown, a GP and disability campaigner, Dr Lola Solebo Consultant Paediatric Ophthalmologist at Great Ormond Street and Melanie Thomas, a music therapist. Sally Hibbert, a Consultant in Paediatric Dentistry, formerly from Liverpool but now based in Australia gave an insightful talk about transitional care to round off the event.

This was the first fully virtual BSPD conference and the organisers were delighted by how well it worked. The online platform promoted engagement and discussion and the social events – particularly the balloon-modelling session led by Dr David Johnson, BSPD’s honorary treasurer - worked well. The principal partners were Oral B and Alexion and Kyowa Kirin was an executive partner.

As ever, BSPD’s Teachers’ Branch organised their study day to coincide with conference and this year’s theme was ‘Current Concepts in Training and Education’. It opened with Dr Sandra Zijlstra-Shaw from the University of Sheffield, who spoke about the characteristics of a good clinical teacher. She was joined by former student Miss Katie Ruaux who described her experience of interprofessional learning and co-creation, and the advantages of combining the two approaches.

Delegates were led 35,000 feet into the sky for the next session, where they were introduced by the team from Black Box Dentistry to human factors, sharing lessons learned from the aviation industry. Dr Fran O’Leary from Glasgow Dental Hospital demonstrated how principles of human factors could be applied to overcome workflow issues in paediatric dentistry.

Dr Laura Gartshore from the University of Liverpool gave delegates a ‘call to action’ when opening the theme on ‘Lessons in Leadership’, challenging delegates to tackle gender imbalance, while Miss Sarah Simpson from Newcastle Dental Hospital outlined the benefits of a leadership fellowship. The final theme, Going Green in Dentistry, was a masterclass in sustainability, with Dr Brett Duane from Trinity College, Dublin and Dr Ahmed Kahatab from The Dental Suite giving delegates both practical advice and plenty of food for thought. The Teachers branch study day sponsor was SDI.

- 1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-achieving-the-20>
- 2) <https://www.beuc.eu/publications/children-massively-targeted-unhealthy-food-ads-consumer-groups'-snapshot-exposes/html>

NOTE TO EDITORS

For more information, contact Caroline Holland on 07974 731396