

BSPD President, Mrs Jenny Harris

Inaugural Address

15 September 2022

My first task is to thank you, Sondos. You have led us with clarity and gentle authority, not least in this last week as our nation mourns the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In the year ahead, I am delighted that you will be continuing some of the initiatives you have started and I, for one, will be relying on your advice and wisdom. Please accept this gift as a token of the Society's appreciation.

Thank you for the very great honour of electing me as your President. And to my friends and colleagues in the South Yorkshire Branch for nominating me four years ago.

At this point it is customary that I share how I come to be standing here today. I nearly didn't make it to my interview for dentistry. It snowed that morning. Just like my adopted city of Sheffield, my home city of Bath is built on seven hills. The roads were impassable so I had a treacherous walk to the station, clutching the portfolio of artwork and embroidery that I hoped would prove I had the manual dexterity for the job. Arriving in a snowless London in walking boots presumably displayed the measure of grit and determination that they were looking for: qualities that I have needed aplenty, as I subsequently followed the 'scenic route' in my career pathway.

By the time I qualified I had already taken out teeth on four continents. I followed that with a working life at no less than three dental hospitals, in three different community dental services (one of them on three separate occasions), and as member of three regional branches of BSPD, so far! I took a zig-zag path between NHS and university posts and back again. And for much of the past 20 years, alongside my part-time NHS clinical 'day job' I have been involved in initiating and managing projects to empower the dental profession to confidently and effectively safeguard children, and I have been rewarded with the satisfaction of having seen remarkable change and having played a part.

In the early years, after house officer and SHO jobs in oral surgery, my interest in paediatric dentistry was sparked by senior dental officers, Stephen Faye

(at the time briefly in Sheffield CDS), and Wendy Bellis, in Camden & Islington. Wendy managed a caseload of children with disabilities and complex needs, and proactively sought out early referrals from local paediatricians, demolishing barriers to dental care for some of the most vulnerable. It is a model that inspires me to this day in my current post as a community-based Consultant here in Sheffield.

Importantly, my colleagues at Camden & Islington CDS also made sure to teach me a public health perspective. Clinical Director, Jennifer Jacobs, sent me off to do a qualification in health education at college evening classes, which gave me my first taste of working closely with non-dental health and social care professionals. From that time, I stayed involved with the BDA, its CDS Group, BSDH and BASCD – valuing the common ground between us and other specialities. And it has often been my involvement in representing us outside of dentistry that has brought me most job satisfaction.

In the early years, my career choices were often about grasping new opportunities whenever we moved, as Ian climbed the Restorative Dentistry ladder. My lecturer post at Birmingham Dental School was one such, coinciding with a bleak time when training numbers were hard to come by and many aspiring specialists fell by the wayside. But Drs Linda Shaw and Raman Bedi were generous colleagues, mentors and inspirational leaders. On leaving to move to Sheffield, I summoned up the courage to ask Linda whether she thought I had what it took to be a consultant. Little did I know that her encouragement would have to keep me going for more than a decade before that even began to look like a possibility.

With a final move to Sheffield, spending time with my two gorgeous boys was always a priority for me yet, back then, part-time working was seen by many as a lack of commitment. For several years I worked just two days a week, mainly in Rotherham CDS, and the remaining five days were spent at home, filled with fun and laughter, the boys' activities, and volunteering in church and our local community. By this point I had been accepted onto the specialist list under transitional arrangements.

When our branch of BSPD hosted the conference in 2002, I organised the 50th anniversary dinner at Chatsworth and, the following year, became our Branch representative to BSPD Council. Slowly BSPD itself became, effectively, my training ground as I served in one capacity or another, alongside many of you.

Once the boys were both at school, I was surprised to find myself increasingly thinking about dentistry on my days off. Child protection scandals were on the front pages of the tabloids almost every week. Encouraged by Raneë Townsend, I led a local project to develop practical guidance on dental neglect, because there was none, then wrote to the Chief Dental Officer telling him something needed to be done. I distinctly remember sitting with other mums at the poolside while Nick had a swimming lesson, preoccupied that if the CDO took my letter seriously, it might result in the biggest challenge of my career. A few months later I found myself holding the budget, and the responsibility, to deliver the *Child protection and the dental team* project in the space of a year. I was in over my head!

Many thought I had been handed a poisoned chalice. They had not bargained for the enthusiastic support and encouragement of Richard Welbury, Peter Sidebotham and a multi-disciplinary team of collaborators who joined me in the task. But it is my firm belief that the document's eventual impact in safeguarding children was due to the courage of younger paediatric dentists who ignored their more cautious seniors, took on the challenge, changed their practice then taught and led opinion in our dental schools.

There followed a series of projects, many resulting from BSPD's new link with the NSPCC and other organisations. Over the next decade, BSPD Presidents Stephen Fayle, Elizabeth Davenport, Claire Stevens and many others, encouraged me to work as BSPD's Safeguarding Representative so that the oft-repeated question, "Why does a dentist need to know about safeguarding children?" could be consigned to history.

Eventually, in 2009, Chris Deery and Peter Bateman created the job opportunity I had all but given up on. I was successful at interview and resumed training. Helen Rodd gamely volunteered to be Educational Supervisor to an opinionated trainee only two months her junior. I was 46 when I sat ISFE, Jamie and Nick then 14 and 12!

My 10 years since as a Consultant have been punctuated not by career challenges but by personal ones, some of them inexplicable and indescribably sad. But I have been sustained by my Christian faith, by the love of my family, the kindness of friends, by flowers, cards, long walks in the Peak District and homemade lasagnes left on my doorstep. I am immensely grateful to my dentist and dental

nurse colleagues in both the departments of Paediatric Dentistry and Community & Special Care Dentistry of Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Trust for their patience with me during this time and I have them to thank for being able to continue in the job I still love.

By now it must be quite clear that I would not be standing here if it were not for those BSPD members who *inspired* me, those who *encouraged* me along the way and those of you who have been my *companions* on the path. That path rarely went to plan, at least not to my plan, but it has had high points and viewpoints I could never have imagined, had I followed a more conventional route.

But now to the road ahead. We are here because there is an important and ongoing job to do. We are here because we want to improve children's oral health.

To this end, this year I will be leading BSPD in a focus on children's rights. We hope this is something you will want to get behind, whatever your role in paediatric dentistry. Our Executive Committee will be doing some training with UNICEF and in the new year we will be collaborating with the British Dental Association to raise awareness more widely across dentistry. We want to see children's rights in every curriculum where the dental team is trained. Furthermore, we intend to re-launch BSPD's updated policy document on dental neglect, as soon as a period of consultation is concluded.

I do not underestimate the task ahead. At a time when the day job is already pressured by pandemic backlogs and staff absence, a recruitment crisis in many parts of the country and, we're told, droves of dentists taking an early exit from the NHS, we now add widening health inequalities and a cost-of-living crisis. So, I urge you all to get involved, be involved, stay involved with the work of BSPD; we are your Society, and we need you to commit your energies and your voices.