

The Academic Life

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Does this sound familiar? 'The implications for the future of the speciality caused by the present crisis in academic orthodontics cannot be over-estimated'. It was written in 1994.¹ Have things improved since then?

In 1986 there were 40 academic posts in the UK,² in 1992 there were 32.³ A recent survey has found there are now just 28 FTE academics in post.⁴ Perhaps more worryingly, there are currently only three lecturers in training posts. It is likely, therefore, that we will not even be able to replace those senior academics who retire or leave posts in the next few years.

Does this really matter? I believe it does. Clinical academics are expected to teach, do research and carry out administration, as well as treat patients. Are we the only people who can perform those tasks? No, but I do believe that we have unique skills important to the speciality.

Consumers of healthcare are becoming more demanding. They require proof of positive treatment outcomes; therefore, our research skills will increasingly be in demand. The government are determined to train more dentists and PCDs; lifelong education is high on the agenda, so our teaching skills are required. On top of this, we are expected to show evidence of maintaining good clinical skills through annual appraisal and possibly revalidation in the future. My non-academic colleagues do an excellent job of treating patients, and either teaching or research. Few can afford the time to do all three. Clinical academics therefore have a unique perspective right across the spectrum.

So why is academic life deemed so unattractive by our trainees? I am not qualified to answer this question, because I made an active choice to enter academia. It continues to amaze me that we entice so few to become academics when, according to A-level results, our dental undergraduates are the brightest individuals ever to have entered the profession and we continue to attract the brightest of the brightest to our speciality. It is not a problem unique to orthodontics.

All I can say is that I find academic life stimulating and enjoyable. Every day is different and I still enjoy coming to work. I hope that I will continue to take pleasure in clinical work, teaching and research for many more years. Which is probably just as well with the current uncertainty over pensions—but that is another problem.

References

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4. University Teachers Group Workforce Survey, March 2005 Cunningham and Luther (Personal communication).

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