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Don't let the past shape the present

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For many years I have been a very keen member of Alpha Omega. This is an organisation that was founded over a century ago in the United States with its primary mission is to fight against discrimination in the dental profession wherever it's found. It continues to provide outstanding postgraduate courses as well as being a real fraternity. I have often wondered whether the anti-discrimination origins of the group was anachronistic.

So it was with great sadness that I heard recently about a particularly unpleasant episode – the details of which I will not dwell too closely on here. The overall gist, however, was that patients in the UK are inherently racist and any practitioner who does not fit within a certain ethnic bracket should be prepared to encounter negative attitudes.

Is this true? I think not; it may have been 30-40 years ago, but certainly not today. When I first started in dentistry in the West End of London I found many practitioners refused to hire black dental nurses. They maintained that they did this, not because they were racist, but because their patients would simply not cope with such an arrangement.

But this has changed. Time has moved on. The people of the UK are open-minded, tolerant and accepting of difference and diversity. I have personal experience of this: I am from a Jewish family, my father's first language is Arabic. There used to be a time when patients who, after being referred to my practice and seeing my name on the door, would ask: "And where is *he* from?"

In those days, I think a lot of people just shrugged off this disparaging attitude and grew thick skin. They became accustomed to it and, in doing so, almost condoned it. I am still guilty that I did not take a stronger stance earlier on as I believe racism will occur only if we let it. Thankfully, when those individuals did later question my efficacy as a practitioner based upon the sound of my name, I took a zero tolerance approach and simply suggested they find treatment elsewhere. I do not think anyone should have to reassure a patient that they are competent, despite their name and ethnicity.

Fortunately, these days are over. I so rarely hear remarks about ethnicity or gender in this profession, that when the aforementioned incident came to light, I was deeply saddened.

Dentistry already receives an often terrible press. Dredging up past bitterness and bad memories of a time that has resolutely been put behind us is unnecessary and disappointing. Just consider the intake by our

dental schools! The draconian 'old boys' who long ago lambasted difference would be spinning in their graves if they knew, I'm certain – but what does that matter? Our profession is proud to be enriched by such diversity and our patients are open-minded and tolerant, with their feet placed firmly in the present and not in the past.

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