



Reminiscences: Alec Pairman, LDS, RFPSGlasg*

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There is evidence these days that recruitment to dentistry owes much to the experiences of the young patient in the dental surgery - sometimes in spite of the best efforts of the dental surgeon to the contrary. Thus it was that a young Alec Pairman in Kilmarnock was attracted to dentistry as a career by visits to the practice of J. Lusk Gibson but later had to resist repeated advice from him that he should change to medicine.

The practice of J. Lusk Gibson and Michael N. Larkin was well organised and was based upon that run by Arthur Blake (senior) in Greenock. Lusk Gibson was very keen on oral surgery and had taken the Higher Dental Diploma of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in November 1937 before becoming an early member of the Oral Surgeons Club of Great Britain.

Alec Pairman completed the introductory course at Anderson's College, took the Dental Hospital course in mechanical dentistry, although apprenticeship in the laboratory of a dental practice was still an option at that time, and qualified LDS RFPSGlasg in 1942.

Alec remembers in particular the strict discipline enforced by Dr W. Malcom Gibson in his early years in charge of the mandatory two-year laboratory period of 2400 hours. Long after qualification he happened to meet Dr Gibson and queried the reason for the severe discipline which often appeared excessive. Dr Gibson confided in him that, on appointment in 1936, he had been warned that he had to improve upon the miserable examination performance of students under an elderly tutor, Mr Ancell B. Johnson. Being short of stature, he admitted that the only way he could find of controlling the 90 or so young stallions in his charge for this two-year period was by the use of a rod of iron.

Alec also recalled how a good friend, Ian Goodall, discovered the heart of gold behind the forbidding appearance of the Dean, Dr J. Forbes Webster, during the Second World War years. Goodall had been captured at Tobruk and transported as a POW through several camps in Italy to Germany. He wrote home and received regular parcels via the Red Cross and, together with another dental POW friend, they hit on the idea of using the time of their captivity to study for the Higher Dental Diploma. A letter was sent to Forbes Webster requesting dental textbooks for study. None arrived! Later in peace-time Goodall and his friend met in Sauchiehall Street and, after a good lunch, decided to discover if their request had ever been received. They boldly marched up to Renfrew Street to beard the fearsome Forbes Webster in his den. Here they learned that the textbooks had indeed been sent after the Board of Management had voted £30 towards the good cause. Forbes Webster was dismayed to learn they had never been received and treated the already mildly inebriated pair to a stiff whisky from a bottle in the boardroom cupboard.

To return to Alec Pairman's own career; in the early wartime years entry to the Royal Naval Dental Branch might be made more certain by attendance at the clinics of the Eastman Dental Dispensary in London where good postgraduate experience might be had from Endicott as Director and Mitchell, a Glasgow-qualified oral surgeon.

Following training at Portsmouth, Alec was posted as a dental officer to HMS Ganges at Harwich and later to an RAF Station at Felixstowe where he provided treatment to RAF and Naval personnel.

Demobbed in 1946 he negotiated the purchase of a practice in Knightswood, Glasgow, for £3500. Approximately one-third of the income of this practice was National Insurance work under a scale of fees which had been reviewed by the Joint Advisory Dental Council in 1938. The implementation of the revised scale had been postponed more than once by the pre-war uncertainty and then by the war itself. Finally introduced in 1947 it provided a welcome increase but was overtaken by the rush for dental treatment following the change to the National Health Service in 1948. Alec clearly remembers the first time that his gross monthly income topped the £100 mark although it was common knowledge that the figure was in excess of £1100 in other practices in Glasgow.

From that period his experience in practice followed that of the average dentist with increasing demand for treatment and regular reductions in the scale of fees as each government sought to control the ever-increasing costs of dental treatment under the National Health Service. Alec served his profession as president of the Glasgow Odontological Society in 1973-74 and as chairman of the West of Scotland branch of the British Dental Association in 1978-79.

He sold his practice and retired in 1983.

* As related to Henry Noble and Archie Whitelaw during a visit on September 4, 2001

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