The average age of a DCP is on the rise, in common with that of other dental team members. While some would say this emphasises the value of experience within the profession, the downside is that not enough young people are being attracted into laboratory work. As a result, we face a looming skills shortage.

Tackling training
Part of the problem is a lack of training opportunities. There is still a school of thought which regards the dental technician as an optional extra, although the recent advances in restorative procedures and prosthetics have in fact expanded the technician’s role in the treatment process.

Graduate wastage is another factor reducing the availability of skilled laboratory labour. Graduating technicians are frequently tempted by the attractive salaries and bonuses offered to sales representatives, and others return to training seeking to become dentists themselves.

The damaging effects of reduced recruitment are not confined to the dental laboratories. As public awareness of oral health issues in the UK continues to rise, the dental industry as a whole may find itself unable to meet patients’ expectations. We also need to remember that skilled dental technicians cannot be trained overnight, and that without an adequate young entry the experience of more senior technicians will not be passed on.

There are currently only 11 venues across the UK offering training in dental technology, none of them in Northern Ireland. Many students are prevented by personal circumstances from travelling the length and breadth of the country to find a suitable course. From every point of view, the present situation is untenable and unacceptable, and a future crisis can only be averted by action now.

Making changes?
There are a few beacons of light alleviating the gloom and pointing the way forward, and which should be attracting the attention of the Department of Health and the Tertiary Education Funding Councils. One example is presented by the University of Kent’s Division of Dentistry, which has applied for a new study route to be approved for dental technicians seeking permission to register after three or more years of working experience. The proposal is presently being reviewed by the GDC, and while the DLA is hopeful a positive outcome is by no means certain.

Assuming approval is granted, the new course would allow dental technicians with fewer than the required seven years of experience to be entitled ‘trainees’ while they work towards full GDC registration. The measure would encourage unqualified staff to remain in the industry and progress towards the full professional recognition achieved through registration, and at the same time prevent the penalising of those who currently work alongside them.

All UK dentists, whether specialists or in general practice, should be pressing for action to close the widening generation gap and attract more high-calibre recruits to service the technical and creative needs of the industry.

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