Don’t make me laugh

It has always seemed to me that dentistry and a good sense of humour are mandatory bedfellows, says Philip Newsome

To most non-dentists, dentistry is rather an odd choice of profession and as a result dentists are often portrayed as being slightly unhinged, a comical and sometimes downright strange bunch. As a result, it has always seemed to me that dentistry and a good sense of humour are mandatory bedfellows. If nothing else you need to have a well-honed funny bone to do the job in the first place.

Of course, there is the old truism that laughter is the best medicine. Dr Hunter ‘Patch’ Adams, as portrayed by Robin Williams in the eponymous bio-pic, believes that comic relief is a major way for people to dissipate pain, and who would want to argue with that? Given that pain, or rather its prevention, is such an integral part of dentistry it would seem that dentists would do well to learn more about the integration of humour into their everyday practice.

There is considerable evidence linking humour and pain relief. Vilayanur S Ramachandran, director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego, used his work with brain-damaged patients to identify a ‘laughter circuit’ in the brain: a network deep in the limbic system, the very centre of our emotions, which fires up when we find something funny. In some of Professor Ramachandran’s patients this circuit would kick into life when exposed to painful stimuli. They would, for example, find the act of having their fingers pricked excruciatingly funny. All this suggests that the neural pathways for pain, fear and laughter are very closely intertwined.

Along similar lines, several researchers have carried out experiments demonstrating that laughter causes the release of endorphins. For example, Professor Robin Dunbar of the school of Biological Sciences at the University of Liverpool carried out an experiment whereby people in small groups were shown different videos. This experiment relied on the assumption that endorphin release raises pain thresholds, and so the ability to withstand pain was used as a proxy for endorphin levels. This was measured in each subject before and after watching the video by measuring how long they could keep a frozen wine-cooler sleeve on their arm.

Subjects who had watched a comedy video, as opposed to a documentary, kept the cooler on for significantly longer, and the more time they spent laughing during the video, the bigger the increase in their apparent pain threshold. Endorphins are natural opiates and significantly, as far as dentistry is concerned, they make us feel relaxed, encourage social interaction and increase our levels of trust.

Doesn’t it make sense then to try and incorporate some degree of humour into our daily practice? I’m not suggesting that you should turn each appointment into a comedy routine but a little levity surely wouldn’t go amiss sometimes.

Reasons to be cheerful – a selection of light-hearted, dentistry-related jokes

I went to the dentist yesterday.
He said, ‘Say aaah’
I said, ‘Why?’
He said, ‘My dog’s just died’.

A man goes to his dentist...
‘Since you fitted my new dentures, I can’t pronounce my Fs, Ts and Hs’
‘Well you can’t say fairer than that, then’
(With a deferential nod to the late, great Tommy Cooper)

When I was a kid, I told my mother I wanted to grow up and be a dentist. She said: ‘You can’t do both’.

Boom boom...

Comments to pd@fmc.co.uk

Philip Newsome is associate professor at the Faculty of Dentistry, University of Hong Kong.