

The following is a transcript of an address given by Stephen Boxhall at the dinner in Hobart on the 13th October 2007 celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the passage of the Tasmanian Legislation that enabled dental technicians to work directly with the public.

I don't think there would be many of us here tonight, who go to work of a morning and think, "how is it that I am able to do this job". It's something we take for granted, a career, a profession that we fell into by accident...came to through family connections. Some younger members may even have been steered into it through career counselling. Not so different from any other job you might say.

What does make it different is that it was here in Tasmania, 50 years ago, that that our profession was legalised.

It was in 1957 that the Tasmanian Parliament passed legislation and became the first jurisdiction *anywhere in the world* to enable dental technicians, or 'dental mechanics' as they were called then, to work directly with the public.

50 years is nothing really as established professions go...although there are dental prosthetists here tonight who were not born then. There are also a number here tonight who can remember when the profession did not exist and its practice was in fact a crime.

Tasmania was the trail blazer. It was a further 15 years before the next state, Victoria, passed its legislation and a further 21 years before Queensland, in 1993, became the last state in Australia to legalise the profession. That's 36 years for it to become nationally adopted. Even more amazing is that the United Kingdom only passed its legislation 2 years ago.

So how did this all come about? How did the technician working for a dentist become a professional working directly with the public. This was just not happening in Tasmania.

In 1843 a Danish technician successfully defended an illegal practice suit against him and was allowed to continue to practise there under a special judicial proclamation.

On the other hand, in Canada in 1924, William Lees, a dental technician who decided to work directly with the public was

convicted for practising dentistry without a licence. (*To try and beat the courts, he even instructed patients to take their own impressions.*)

So, dental technicians flouting the law and working directly with the public had a long history and was a worldwide phenomenon. Why?

Let's come back to Australia.

At the beginning of the 1900s legislation started to come into place around Australia to govern the practice of dentistry. In Tasmania this occurred with the passing of the Dentists Act of 1919, which required dentists to have practised for a specified qualifying period. Those dentists who had been practising for less than the qualifying period were suddenly ineligible to practise as dentists. So, unless they sat examinations or went to university to get a qualification they were out of a job. Some were short of the qualifying time by a matter of months. They may have had established practices with a loyal patient base in the towns and suburbs in which they worked. Now they had no practice and no source of income. This was a cause of great bitterness and the start of illegal dentistry.

Some ignored the legislation and continued to practise. Some however were employed by dentists to do their technical or '*mechanical*' work as it was termed then, becoming labelled '*dental mechanics*'. As time went by, dentists also employed *apprentices* to learn the skills of making dentures from themselves and the mechanics that they employed. (These were our forefathers)

Let's look at where we are now in history. The 1st World War is not long finished and we are heading into the Great Depression of the early 30's. During the depression, times became very hard. It was no longer profitable for many dentists to continue employing mechanics, and many were laid off. The mechanics sometimes leased back the dentists' laboratories but also opened their own. They were contracted only when their services were required.

It was inevitable in these lean times that a public that couldn't afford to pay the dentists' fees for dentures started to look for an alternative.

On the heels of the depression came the 2nd World War. When the war was over our troops came home. Returning dentists and

mechanics went back to, or tried to start up, practices and laboratories.

It was an extremely difficult time for mechanics. Those that were laboratory owners could either depend solely on the variable and often financially unrewarding demand for their services by dentists or go outside the law to supplement their income by providing services direct to the public. Sometimes there wasn't much choice – the fees they were receiving from dentists were in many cases not enough to support their families.

It was around this time that the authorities started to clamp down on mechanics or laboratory owners suspected of working illegally.

The mechanics of Tasmania post-war worked at the Launceston General or the Royal Hobart Hospital; a few were employed by dentists, while others were self-employed as laboratory owners. They were a fragmented assortment of individuals...that is, until late 1947, when two dental mechanics based in Launceston, William Ellis and Max Crawford decided to approach the secretary of one of the national unions based there, George Chidwick, for advice on how to improve wages and conditions for dental mechanics.

Chidwick listened to their claims and advised them to call a meeting of all the mechanics they could get hold of. This first meeting at the City Hotel in Launceston was attended by Max Crawford, William Ellis, Peter Sutor, Brian Carswell, Stan Fuller, Gil Rumney, Dutton Wood and John Hollingsworth.

It was clear to Chidwick that the dental mechanics were receiving a raw deal and persuaded the meeting that they needed an organisation and, if they wanted, he would help them. He collected one pound from each of them, had letterheads and application cards printed, and then wrote to all the dental mechanics he could find in Tasmania outlining the aims and objectives of the proposed organisation.

A group of mechanics from the south joined this northern group, Ken McIntyre, Ian Wishart Smith, Harry Hill, Graham Hunt, Don Mc Fie and Alf Males.

Over the following months meetings were arranged right around state and in 1948 the Tasmanian Dental Mechanics Association was formed. Its inaugural President, Dutton Wood, was a veteran of World War 1. Some will know his son, Norm, who became a dentist and practised in Hobart for many years.

In October 1949 Reginald Johnston, who had recently opened a dental laboratory in Hobart, also joined the Association. Reg was to play a major role in the Association in the years to come and became a state *Life Member*.

It took a year or so to really put the machinery in place to start to tackle the Association's two main aims which were:

- the establishment of an Award to cover those employed in the industry, and
- the eradication of the uncertainty, fear and frustration of those who'd been on the wrong side of the law by changing the law of Tasmania to give dental mechanics *chairside status*, to conduct business directly with the public.

This was the start of a 10-year battle.

Much of the initial business of the Association was concerned with the Award. An application was made to The Tasmanian wages board for the Association to be recognised and given representation on the newly formed Dentists Wages Board and in 1950 a log of claims was presented on behalf of dental employees. *(A condition was set by the government that an award would be established only if it covered all members of the dental industry, including nurses and receptionists. So, in 1950, the Association amended its constitution and reinvented itself as the Tasmanian Dental Mechanics and Dental Employees Association.)*

The result of this claim was a 3– 4 pound per week rise for employed dental mechanics. This was a considerable amount in those days considering the average wage they were receiving was around 8 pounds.

With the success with the award in early 1951 and the stated aim of achieving chairside status, more mechanics started to join the Association.

Roxey Mitchel, Max Keal, Bill Wansborough, Alf Mickelborough, Ray Russell, George Debnam, George Fulton, Rex Warmesley, Bill Woods, Marcus Brownrige, Bob Horne, Tony McShane, Bill Field,

Ron Boyle, and Sydney Joyce are names from this period. Some of these remained members and became stalwarts of our Association late into their lives.

On the 1st of July 1951 a young mechanic from Smithton, Rex Edwards became a member of the Association. No one could have foreseen the role that this man was to play in the evolution of our profession, not just in Tasmania but for the whole of the country. He was softly spoken, articulate and intelligent... a strategist, respected by all, with a dedication to the profession that he maintained up till his death in 1994 aged 75. (*He was actually delivering an address of our history to students undertaking a new Registration course that had commenced here in Tasmania when he suffered a heart attack from which he subsequently died.*) He became Federal President and also played a major role in Victoria and NSW gaining their legislation. He was a state Life Member and became the inaugural Federal Life Member.

The battle to amend the Dentists Act to give dental mechanics chairside status now really started to gain momentum. The Australian Dental Association (at state and national levels) was vigorously opposed to any move towards chairside status and used all of its influence politically, publicly and behind the scenes, in an attempt to stop the passage of any such legislation in Tasmania. They knew this would set a precedent for the rest of the country.

Our Association's strategy was to create greater public awareness, and, in turn, pressure on the politicians. Methods included lobbying politicians, public meetings, radio interviews, press advertisements and, probably most importantly, Association members becoming active members of both Liberal and Labor parties.

So, hopes were high in 1952 when the then Labor Health Minister, Dr. Turnbull indicated that he was considering amending the Dentists Act to give dental mechanics chairside status. Up until this stage there had been no formal contact between the government and the Association. One can only assume that the behind-the-scenes lobbying had started to take effect. I also suspect that the secretary's Union and Labor Party connections may have had some influence.

A delegation in the north met with the Health Minister and a southern delegation met with the Chief Minister, Alf White. The result of these meetings was a request for a submission from the Association to the government and an assurance by the government that a bill would be introduced.

Meetings to formulate the submission and deal with the running of the Association were held regularly, every couple of months, or more frequently if some crisis arose. They were usually held in the middle of the state, in rooms at the Tunbridge Hotel or Powells Hotel in Campbelltown. This was to go on for years.

Many of us have heard the stories of these hair-raising journeys up and down the old Midlands road through fog and snow in the dead of winter, particularly if you happened to be travelling in Reg Johnston's Morris Minor or Roxy's Wolseley. Stan Fuller's Chev apparently had part of the floor missing and you could see the road rushing by your feet !!! He sometimes had trouble getting passengers.

The initial hope began to wane after 18 months or so with very little progress towards legislation. They realised that a renewed and stronger campaign was required.

In 1953 the Association formalised its association with the union movement and became a member of the Launceston Trades Hall. *(This caused much soul searching for many members who had other political leanings, particularly Dutt Wood, the president, who tendered his resignation as a result. It was left on the table for a number of meetings till he was persuaded to withdraw it.)*

In March 1953 the Trades and Labour Council passed a motion supporting the introduction of legislation and, as a result of this, the Premier Mr Cosgrove reiterated his support for legislation to be introduced. But it was controversial and politically uncertain.

Then in 1954 at the Annual State Conference of the Liberal Party, a surprising thing happened. It was known that the Parliamentary Members of the Party were strongly opposed to the proposed legislation and that many had very strong allegiances to the dentists. It came as a shock when delegates at that Conference overwhelmingly supported the motion that dental mechanics should be given the right to deal with the public. *(Although Rex*

Edwards's was not really an official delegate his diplomatic skills saw him have the matter debated.)

To counter this but appease the party, Tom Pearsall, Liberal member for Franklin, moved for a Select Committee of the House of Assembly to enquire into the question of registration. Our Association had no confidence in this committee. It came as no surprise that it brought down a finding against the mechanics. It was hoped by many opponents that this would be the end of it. That wasn't to be the case, the nature of this committee and the motive behind setting it up stirred the mechanics on and made them more determined than ever to continue the battle.

Time really doesn't allow me to tell you in any detail of all the events that took place over the next few years.

But after being returned in the 1955 elections, the Cosgrove government did introduce a bill which got through the lower house, but was defeated by one vote in the Legislative Council.

In his closing speech the Leader of the Government in the Council stated, "the result of this vote must not be taken as a defeat for dental mechanics or a victory for dentists, both parties must go away and attempt to reach agreement on this question". The mechanics, although disappointed, felt they had gained a tremendous amount of ground.

Meetings between the two associations were held under the chairmanship of Dr Murray, the Tasmanian Director of Health. But they were deadlocked, both sides had little give.

Rex Edwards stated later, "that although not aware of it at this time, these meetings were however of tremendous importance. They gave the mechanics an opportunity to place before the Director a clear picture of their position...and they gained his support." This was to be of tremendous value later when evidence was being given by the Health Department to a second Select Committee.

A year later the matter was again on the ALP state conference agenda and as a result the government reintroduced the legislation.

It successfully passed the Lower House, but when the bill was again presented to the Legislative Council, Mr Orchard, who had in 1955 been against the Mechanics, moved for another Select Committee. The Committee interviewed some 43 witnesses over the course of 10 months. Our guys were not very confident about the outcome of this enquiry as 3 of the Committee had voted against it 2 years earlier.

So, when in August 1957 Mr Orchard presented his report to the Council it was a tremendous surprise to learn that the Committee recommended that dental mechanics should be registered and given the right to deal directly with the public.

In September 1957, Mr Orchard, the member who had so bitterly opposed mechanics in 1955, introduced a bill to implement the recommendations of the Select Committee. On the 3rd of October, the bill was passed by the Legislative Council. It went back to the lower house and was passed on the **6th of December, 1957. *The battle had been won.***

The first examination was held in June 1958 and the successful candidates were registered on 1st of July, that year.

While tonight we remember our founders, I think that it is very appropriate here that I make special mention of a couple of others.

Dr Eric Canning, I am sure known to many. He was considered by our side of the argument, a glimmer of hope, a man of reason and integrity. Despite, I am led to believe, considerable pressure from the ADA nationally not to do so, he agreed to write the curriculum for the initial training course for mechanics. This became known around Australia as the '*Canning Course*'. Eric was also a member of the inaugural Dental Mechanics Registration Board. It gives us very great pleasure to have Eric here with us tonight.

Mr Laurie Shea was another. He was secretary of the Board, a position he held for 40 years until it was replaced by the Dental Prosthetists Registration Board as a result of the Dental Prosthetists Act of 1996.

Also Dr Maurice Holmes. Many of us who trained in Tasmania will remember well the weeks spent at the Tasmanian Dental Services clinics in Newtown. Dr Holmes worked for the Department of Health and was in charge of running the registration course for

many years, along with Ron Boyle, Head Dental Mechanic with the Department, who made sure we had the patients to treat and the materials. Without the support of these men and the Department there may not have been any training carried out in Tasmania.

In preparing this I have listened to tapes, read many letters, papers and minute books. The minutes recorded by George Chidwick are quite extraordinary, Firstly, they are handwritten in this wonderfully perfect copperplate with rarely a correction. They convey amazing detail and feeling. One can feel the commitment, earnestness and, at times, desperation oozing from the pages. They are a wonderful record of our history.

I would also like to pay tribute to the subsequent Secretaries, who worked tirelessly for us and became part of the family. Leo's father, Burt Green, Elaine Carter, and Carlene Jennings are three that made outstanding contributions.

To finish up I'd like to quote Rex Edwards from the address that he gave to the National Conference in Queensland in 1993 to celebrate the passing of their legislation.

He says:

On reaching my age one tends to reflect on what has occurred in relationship to the issue in which one has been involved and you ask the question; "What have I achieved?" "Has it all been worthwhile?"

If during this passage through life one plays a part in decision making which lifts from the shoulders of people a tremendous feeling of frustration; gives to them status and security, and perhaps most important of all a feeling of satisfaction in their work, then I believe something worthwhile has been accomplished. At this moment I like to feel that I have made a contribution which has assisted in establishing this situation.

There is certainly no doubt about the answer to the question he poses... not just in Rex's case but in that of all of our predecessors who had the vision, who fought the fight, who made the sacrifices to enable us to be the dental health professionals we are today. We thank you