Are we being good ancestors?

Embracing change and looking forward.

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What have you missed during the COVID restrictions? Family and friends, of course. After lockdown, I shall restart my regular games of real tennis. This is the original court game that gave rise to lawn tennis, invented by monks playing in cloisters and made famous in Shakespeare’s Henry V. The Dauphin has sent him tennis balls as an insult: ‘When we have matched our rackets to these balls, / We will in France, by God’s grace, play a set / Shall strike his father’s crown into the hazard.’ (And by the way, won’t it be good to see live theatre and music again?)

The perception of real tennis is of a posh game for toffs. In our club in Oxford, however, we have all sorts, from plumbers to impecunious dons. There is no doubt that this perception limits its appeal to younger generations, women and ethnic minorities. But it is also a handicap game so that my very average ability can be matched to very gifted players. One of these in our club is Roman Krznaric, who has just published a book entitled The Good Ancestor. He argues that in the midst of a pandemic, when we are inevitably glued to the here and now, we still have an obligation to take a longer-term view than the next year or two, the next Parliament or even, dare I say it, the current presidency of RCS England. We need to leave the world (and the world of surgery) a better place for future generations.

So how are we doing this? We are taking the first halting steps. We now have a Sustainability in Surgery group whose aim is to influence organisations, the surgical community and RCS England over the balancing of patient and population health outcomes with financial, social and environmental sustainability. We have, jointly with the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, launched a ‘green surgery’ challenge, a fun competition to promote sustainability in surgical departments. Our finance and investment committee is reviewing our investment strategy so that we will have top class environmental sustainability and governance credentials. Climate change has a huge effect on health and we cannot ignore it.

Just like my tennis, RCS England has a perception problem too. White, male and posh? The independent review into our leadership diversity and inclusion chaired by Baroness Helena Kennedy, a lawyer and member of the House of Lords, has just been published. It makes uncomfortable reading and many will have a gut reaction that it is not fair. RCS England and the surgical profession are perceived by some as being exclusive, unwelcoming to women and ethnic minorities, and family unfriendly.

Long gone are the days when we could assume that the brightest medical students would want to be surgeons, would want to be like us. With specialisation and all the changes in the organisation of postgraduate medical education, many question RCS England’s role. If we are to truly represent our members, we have to reflect that membership both in our committees, our Council and our senior office bearers, and in the staffing of the College. It must mean a better deal for women, international medical graduates, and specialty and associate specialist doctors, for those in the early stages of a career juggling family responsibilities, and for those in mid-career who feel left out.

The recommendations for change will be a big ask for us. Within two presidential terms, we have been challenged to reform. If we do not, we risk becoming irrelevant. We have a glorious history, with wonderful traditions and treasures, but we have to be sure to be good ancestors. Change is always difficult.

This next phase in the life of RCS England will be very exciting as we move into our new building. We will not be handing over the keys, we will not be betraying our duties to maintain the reputation and standing of the College, but will instead be sharing the keys with future generations of surgeons from all backgrounds, sexes and ethnicities. Jonas Salk, the polio vaccine pioneer, said: ‘If we want to be good ancestors, we should show future generations how we coped with an age of great change and great crises.’