So why did you choose dentistry?

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Many dentists have been asked "why did you choose to do dentistry?" in some way or another. We are often presented with some or other cliché such as "I want to help people", but truthfully, the factors that a person may reflect on when considering a profession would include prestige, financial growth and security, job-satisfaction and potential for professional and career development. In all probability the dental profession itself was the best advertisement at the time of deciding on the career path to follow. Yet dentistry is a very specific blend of skills in a healthcare profession that hides a vast ocean of challenges only seen once you enter the profession. Despite this, dentistry draws a large variety of personality types to its practice. There is no doubt that there is a fair amount of artistic ability required in addition to the honing of the clinical acumen.

Dentistry is not free from its stressors and risks. There are many aspects of our work that are considered highly stressful and even dangerous. In terms of the career itself, several studies have identified various factors that negatively impact on the quality of life at work. A recent cross-sectional study that investigated working conditions and the challenges encountered in dentistry found that dentists are at a higher risk for burnout when they have a higher number of patients they perceive as anxious.1 When work-related stresses are combined with unpleasant experiences, the quality of service-delivery becomes compromised. It is therefore important for the practitioner to be aware of this, and to suitably compensate or compromize where possible. This is for the sake of the immediate dental team members, and the patient's well-being and safety. Interestingly though, the authors of the study confirm the sparsity of research on seemingly challenging patient types for dentists; and how this relates to job satisfaction and work-related outcomes.

The specific and targeted management of anxious patients appears to have a positive effect on the perceived work-related stress of the dental practitioner. This approach must also include communications training. Identifying those anxious patients early on in consultation and implementing suitable protocols to manage these challenging patients has been shown to be valuable in increasing job satisfaction.

In general, the literature indicates that dentists do have a good level of job satisfaction. Whenever dentists report lower job satisfaction levels, it tends to be related to independence, resources, relationships with patients



and payment.² Dental professionals expressing an intent to change jobs often cite various reasons, however, job satisfaction is seen to hold a high potential to serve as a predictor of actual movement. Similarly, when recruiting and working on retaining dentists, another study suggested that employers must innovate to offer employees acceptable pay, appropriate status or recognition, the realization of personal growth potential, manageable and flexible working hours, and clearly defined career pathways.³

If we look back at what it was that influenced this final decision to step into dental school, I am convinced we will hear a wide spectrum of different and interesting stories, but I am also convinced that the bulk of these would not have taken into account the realities spoken of above. Nonetheless, this is certainly one of the most beautiful and fulfilling professions to be a part of, and we should continue to nurture and grow it as a part of our individual legacies. Whatever the time of an individual's decision to become a dentist, or even the initial intent, we will always face the curios interrogation of "Why dentistry?"

References

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