A good intention or genuine resolve?
Nigel Jones discusses the work life balance and whether dental professionals can attain it.

Apparently, the sale of sal-ads were unseasonably low he said. The theory is that the cold and snowy weather gave everyone a “get out of jail free” card when it came to resolutions about leading a healthier lifestyle. I suspect the fitness clubs also saw less of a fight for equipment than is usual at this time of year. Not only was the difficulty in getting to a gym a convenient excuse not to go, but compared to gritting your teeth on a cross-trainer, gritting the drive seemed preferable!

The interesting thing will be whether or not the good intentions announced on New Year’s Eve can get back on track in February or, if people will apply Olympic rules to this year’s false start and disqualify themselves from all resolutions until 2011. For many, giving up was inevitable and it probably doesn’t matter. For others, it will be a missed opportunity and they will be the poorer for it.

Take, for example, that plan to restore a better balance to your life, to get a better work life “blend” as the HR professionals would nowa-days describe it. For some, even the pressure to deliver UDA targets didn’t stop them feeling quietly relieve-d that the snow legitimised a postponement of that re-engage-ment with the NHS treadmill, as well as the one at the gym. That’s potentially quite revealing.

I have always been intrigued by those dentists whose response to questions about how things are going is to talk almost exclusive-ly about the size of their practice turnover. The twist these days is to talk about the size of their NHS contracts and the volume of UDAs to which they have committed. But, is that really what success is all about?

Last year, my young children were having tennis lessons along-side a five year old son of an NHS dentist who had the highest UDA target I’ve ever encountered. Both sets of parents spent Sunday morn-ings dutifully camped at the side of the court, willing their children to hit more than air, as the ever patient coach fed an endless stream of tennis balls in their direction.

Actually that’s not quite true. The NHS dentist was dealing with an endless stream of calls fed to him from his practice team, so was un-able to camp anywhere let alone watch how his son was faring. As he paced to and fro staring at the ground, he avoided the disap-proving glances from other parents and also a look of such re-signed sadness on his wife’s face. This was clearly the norm.

This brought to mind a dentist I knew who decided to turn private at the time of the 1990 “new” contract. Despite be-ing fearful of the recession, the wide availability of NHS dentists, and the probable resistance to private charges and the potential lack of pa-tient loyalty (sound familiar?), this dentist felt he could only avoid compromising patient care if he moved away from the NHS.

Ten months later, I returned to the practice knowing his bravery had been rewarded with a demon-stration of faith from his patients, which had created a thriving private practice with a turnover of which he could only previously have dreamt. Upon my arrival, I asked his wife, the practice manager, how things were going, “Fantastically” she said. “He’s coming home and actually talking to our kids now.” Now that’s a measure of success.

If you haven’t already, you may find it interesting to have a flick through Jack Black’s Mindstore book and, in particular, the section about The Wheel of Life. This idea helps you think about eight dimen-sions of your life of which work is only one. Family is inevitably an-other and so are health, financial, social, personal development, atti-tude and spiritual.

For each element, give yourself a score out of ten for how comfort-able you feel about that aspect of your life where ten is perfect and zero is where you need help. Then, draw a circle and divide it in to eight equal sections, like a pie chart or the spokes of a wheel. Each spoke represents one of the dimensions so with zero being the centre and ten the outer edge, mark the scores you gave yourself earlier.

Connecting these marks will create a shape that can say a lot about the balance in your life. Most NHS dentists I speak to would have a wheel that is unlikely to roll smoothly, others have allowed their work to take over so much of their lives that their wheel would look as if it is about to stop rolling alto-gether. This simple exercise can be so revealing and give you the spur you need to focus on areas of your life that may have been neglected in recent years.

Of course, it is possible that your NHS practice is giving you that balance already, in which case, congratulations. Alternatively, you may already feel out of control of your practice workload and it may be hard to quell the rising sense of desperation, let alone start reducing your time commitment to your practice.

But look around you. You will almost certainly be surrounded by fellow practitioners who once felt much the same way yet are now running successful private practic-es and, like the dentist with whom I was talking with just last night, are walking their kids home from school every Friday.

Of course some will decide to wait in hope that whichever Gov-ernment is in place in the summer will take the decision for them. If so, at the very least, I hope they get a plan of action in place so they re-tain some semblance of control if a major move of the goalposts were to happen. However, others will decide to take the initiative themselves and not rely on external forces to con-trol their destiny.

As the wintry weather has proved, it can be easy to have your good intentions derailed but, with a pivotal year for UK den-tistry ahead, so now is the time for genuine resolve.

About the author
Nigel Jones has worked in primary care for over 16 years. Recently returning to the dental industry from Virgin Healthcare, Nigel has helped over 400 dental practices successfully convert to private practice.