A good intention or genuine resolve?

Nigel Jones discusses the work life balance and whether dental professionals can attain it

Apparently, the sale of salads were unreasonably low he be so as the ever-present 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 grilling your teeth on a cross-trainer, grilling 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 nowadays describe it. For some, even the pressure to deliver UDA targets didn’t stop them feeling quietly relieved 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 exclusively 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 alongside a five year old son of an NHS dentist who had the highest UDA rate of the practice. As the wintry weather has come and gone, I have been reminded of the inner edge, mark the scores you gave yourself earlier.

For each element, give yourself a score out of ten for how comfortable 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 into 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 altogether. 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 practices 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 Government 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 retain 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 control 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 dentistry 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.