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Stress in the dental profession
Neel Kothari discusses the stress that comes with practising dentistry

Despite the many rewards of being a dentist, I have always felt that, overall, ours is a lonely profession. The stress of day to day decision making, potential litigation and the practice of defensive dentistry is enough to keep anyone busy, but add on the stress of complying with non clinical organisations such as the CQC and having to nod politely with the shear mass of risk assessments, practice policies and legislation, this is simply enough to suck the soul out of any person.

Fellow editorial board member, Stephen Hudson once told me that all you really need with your patients is rapport, “no one cares if you have rapport with them”. At the time I politely nodded and pretended to agree.

As the entrance dental school I was always told that dentists have the highest suicide rates amongst all professions. I’m not completely sure whether this is in fact true, however a number of authors have raised the issue of suicide and have highlighted its prevalence. A literature review published in the International Dental Journal by Sancho and Ruiz (2010) looking at whether the risk of suicide amongst dentists is a myth or a reality came to the conclusion; “In the literature we find systematically a suicide rate among dentists higher than those of other occupations. These studies lack the correct scientific weight and new studies are required that introduce the demographic variables, the psyciatric morbidity previous to the development of the profession, the opportunity factor, the stressors not related to work and the relative emphasis to these are necessary to for the profession to decrease the risk of suicide.”

Last December dentist Dr Kamath committed suicide after feeling “harassed and bullied” by health chiefs over a “bullying” complaint. He had defended Sancho and Ruiz’s (2010) work saying it has made day to day working a slightly happier environment.

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In a statement read to the court, wife Dr Rajni Prasad described how the couple felt after their last meeting with the trust: “My husband and I were both very stressed by this and both felt very vulnerable and harassed and bullied with no support offered.”

The need for support is an absolutely essential part of our profession and for one am sick and tired of government officials telling us how intelligent dentists are every time they want to enforce a new change. Our dental school training doesn’t teach us why or how to do a legimella risk assessment or why I find it easier to access my bank account online rather than the NHSBSA website to update and verify my pension contributions! It teaches us the foundations of clinical dentistry instead.

It really bugs me when dentists are asked to put their professional integrity above all other incentives but are not supported in doing so. For instance, in 2011 the House of Commons Health Select Committee suggested that whistleblowing should be a statutory duty for all NHS employees. The proposal was to make it a ‘professional obligation’ upon all healthcare workers to report colleagues they suspect of poor practice or misconduct - and if they failed to do so, they would themselves face disciplinary action. However at the same time the Committee said they were well aware that some doctors and nurses who have blown the whistle have ‘sometimes been subject to suspension, dismissal or other sanctions’.

Over the course of our professional careers we will all encounter situations outside of our control that must make us question whether or not we should consider our concerns to higher powers. Whilst on face value it may seem that this decision should be an easy one, in reality very few people actually do whistle blow and those who do are not always met with welcoming arms.

At the risk of stating the obvious it is clear that the business of dentistry is a very stressful one and it probably always has been. It’s difficult to point the finger at one specific part of the job that brings rise to such stress, but in my opinion dealing with the non clinical business side of things brings rise to many more problems than the healthcare side we were taught at dental school.

For most of us, creating happiness within a workplace clearly involves more than just a monetary reward and unfortunately having to comply with the raft of legislation imposed upon the profession such as HTM01-05 and CQC inspections simply claws away just that little bit more happiness from our day to day working lives.

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About the author
Neel Kothari qualified as a dentist from Dental University in 2005, and currently works as a partner in a general dental practice in Sawston, Cambridge. He graduated as a specialist dental practitioner in endodontics in 2011 and has since actively worked for the Dental Trauma Guide and the British Society for Paediatric Dentistry. He has a large interest in young patient care and is an active member of the American Academy of Paediatric Dentistry.