

A marathon not a sprint

Michael Sultan considers the course of a dentist's career.



I promised myself that I would never ever do it again, but this April I once again took part in



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the London Marathon. I can't honestly say that I ran it, but I certainly completed it. It was a great experience, I got the medal and the T-shirt, but I also got sunburnt and was certainly very sore. However, following the runners mantra, "Pain is necessary, suffering is optional", I was still left with a stupid grin on my face. It was certainly worth it, but running a marathon is about more than just running – it's about training, perseverance, and pacing yourself so you stand a chance of actually finishing. ☺

Opinion

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As I covered the miles, to distract myself and to take my mind off my legs I contemplated my life and dentistry and the many parallels with running. I feel that there are an increasing number of young dentists who have stopped seeing dentistry as a profession. It is often seen as a short term fix with a quick sprint for cosmetic treatment rather than a slow life long career full of learning, growth and development. Dentistry is a long-distance profession, and while it may be painful with little gratification along the way, the aim is to get to the end (albeit with a stupid grin on your face).

In the good old days families would make their regular visit to the dentist – often an 'old-fashioned' professional treating several generations of the same family. While making a living was obviously important, dentistry was about more than that. There was pride in the profession, a sense of both duty and desire to serve the greater needs of your patients.

What I see now is graduates sprinting for the spas and cosmetic centres and who are more interested in facial fillers rather than dental fillings. This rush not only to get rich quick, but to exit the general practice as quickly as possible, is a bit like entering a race without being properly prepared – without a general practice foundation and experience they can miss out. Interestingly, I was not allowed to start my masters course until I'd completed five years in general practice. As a result I saw a bit of everything and learnt more about dentistry and people in those five years than in any other training I've ever had.

Another important facet of the profession that seems to be disappearing is loyalty. The building of relationships with patients, staff and the community can lead to a happy life. In the current rush for cosmetic dentistry however, patients see only a 'commodity' and so shop around for the lowest cost.

Like a marathon, dentistry is very much a personal journey and doesn't need to be competitive.

Like a marathon, dentistry is very much a personal journey and doesn't need to be competitive. It's about being proud of what you've done and do, competing with yourself to advance your own knowledge. It's also important to preserve a sense of balance – something many business and life coaches talk about these days, but is hard to put into practice effectively. The realisation that this great profession we choose to go into is for the long term – not just for the time it takes to get out in front – can help to achieve this.

As a profession I feel we are up against many obstacles, one of which is that we no longer feel trusted, feeling the need to 'look over our shoulder' all the time, being dragged down to the 'lowest common denominator' by the mounting rules and regulations. I'm sure 99 per cent of the profession want to do what's best for the patient, but because of funding cuts, monies are limited and in the NHS life-saving and other treatments are likely to take priority over dentistry. Nevertheless, quality of life is very important and teeth add to that quality – being free from pain, and able to communicate without embarrassment is fundamental – teeth for the rich and dentures for the poor is not a choice that should have to be made.

Despite all this, dentistry is still a great career. It is a privilege to have the facilities to alter people's lives, get them out of pain, make them feel good about themselves and alleviate suffering. It is also the result of a lifetime of learning, not only about teeth but about people. As professionals we can build real relationships – it may be a marathon, but it's one that's worth running.



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