

# Better or worse?

Michael Sultan considers how difficult it is being a dentist today.

I was recently treating a colleague of mine, Howard Myers, who told me about a paper he had co-written with his sister in 2004, entitled *It's difficult being a dentist: stress and health in the general dental practitioner*.

After Howard had left my chair, I thought it would be worth looking up the paper to see whether things had changed in the last decade or so – to



**Michael Sultan**

is a specialist in endodontics and the clinical director of EndoCare.

see if they'd got better or worse (I'll withhold my suspicions at this point).

So, in 2004 Howard and his team were very thorough in their study; with a sample size of approximately 2,500 GDPs they collated data based on a number of questionnaires to determine the most common 'stressors' in dentistry. Included in the list was running behind schedule – on par with dealing with difficult, uncooperative patients at 68 per cent. Working in the NHS was another common problem, as was working under constant time pressures. Lower down the list were staffing issues and financial constraints.

As a result of this degree of stress, respondents also reported physical and mental problems – including minor psychiatric conditions at 30 per cent (comparable with GPs). Backache, as ever, was also very high, as was

reliance on alcohol.

Howard, based on these findings, recommended the need to address these issues by introducing interventions to combat stress. It was also noted that many of the respondents had downplayed their negative responses (that British stiff upper lip in action again), so the results were probably far worse than detailed on paper.

Reading Howard's paper reminded me of another article (one more anecdotal than scientific), that appeared in *the Guardian* in 2000. Seemingly corroborating Howard's research, this article reported that the stresses of working in the NHS were driving dentists to alcoholism and suicide.

Indeed, dentists have the second highest suicide rate of any profession

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– coming in just below medical doctors. The research suggests that dentists are 1.67 times more likely to commit suicide compared to someone in an average job – a startling figure. The reasons ranged from unhappy patients transferring their grievances to their practitioner to having to deal with a heightened sense of workplace stress.

Of course, this is all based on research conducted a decade or more ago. If we were to rewrite Howard's paper today, would we get the same results?

Fundamentally, I think there are a number of factors missing that have only really started to emerge in the last few years; if we want to try and fully gauge whether dentistry is less or more stressful now, we have to include them in the mix.

For starters, our patient base is becoming far more demanding. This is mainly due to how informed they are; the expectation for clinical excellence is far higher than ever before. Juxtapose this with a trend for aggressive legal pursuit and we see how litigation against dentists is on the rise.

On top of this, our profession finds itself involved with ever more punitive organisations. The GDC, while nobly trying to protect the public from malpractice, has become steadily more draconian. Dentists are harangued with fitness to practise charges on a regular basis. You simply need to consider the alarming figures: 14 per cent of the profession have already had cases brought against them and the rest of us are now wondering when it will happen to us – not if. The stress associated with these cases can be

devastating and its link to suicides has been well documented.

The CQC, too, is becoming increasingly Orwellian, with strict regulations and controls imposed again and again. The cost of complying with these is also becoming more tangible in terms of both time and monetary expense. Our practices are being turned into mini-hospitals and we all have stories of colleagues who have simply given up in the face of such adversity.

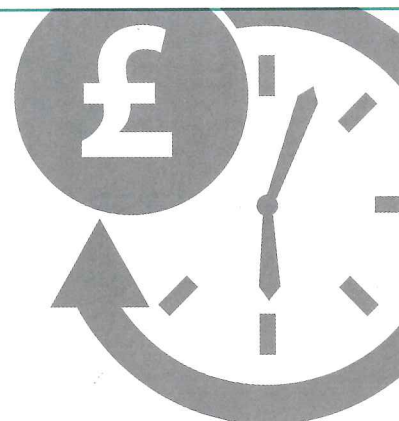
We're also finding that our newest colleagues are entering practice in substantial debt, with the heavy weight of student loans bearing down on them at all times. Coupled with the fact that finding an ideal job is becoming increasingly difficult and we see that the stress starts early and only endures.

One of my personal 'stressors' is the perpetual media witch-hunt. As a profession, we dentists have never had the shiniest of reputations, but in recent years things have gone from bad to worse. As an endodontist, I am continually incensed by fear mongering headlines, such as how 95 per cent of all terminal cancer patients have had root canal treatments and that the correlation between these two things must be somehow medically revelatory. And let's not forget Cecil the Lion, whose murder got the media painting us all as sadists.

If all this wasn't enough, we still have to appreciate that dentistry is an intrinsically difficult and competitive profession that requires high levels of skill, patience and experience. It's a field that dictates long hours and regular complaints from patients – and while it may seem clichéd, it's still the case that the majority of us genuinely want to help people and provide high standards of care. When we discover we cannot always do so, it can be personally demoralising.

So is it better or worse now? I believe it's undeniably worse. Our anxieties have multiplied and we are facing an increasingly dispirited profession. We need help and we need it before the situation worsens further.

References available on request.



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