"It is very difficult to escape from your professional status"

An interview with practice manager Gary Smith, Australia

Gary Smith is well aware of the shifting demands practitioners are facing today. Increasing service levels, changing expectations of patients, and achieving a competitive edge through up-to-date technology and procedures place increasing pressure on health care professionals in terms of both their time and resources, he said. At the recent Australian Dental Congress in Brisbane, Dental Tribune Asia Pacific had the opportunity to talk to him about this subject, and why new technology might not necessarily help reduce the burden.

Dental Tribune Asia Pacific: Mr Smith, has the dental business changed much, and what are the main challenges of today compared with the past?

Gary Smith: The changing expectations of patients are one of the greatest challenges the industry has faced over the years. Patients’ demands are increasing, along with their expectations of the level of service to be provided. The acceptance of the level provided by dental practitioners at times may differ from the level of service the patient actually expects, however.

The intrusion of government’s and health insurers’ requirements has changed over the years, and believe that the provision of services will become more complicated as a result of further involvement of these two groups. Of course, one of the greatest challenges remains the running of a small to medium enterprise. This, as well as the increasing red tape and making a profit, will always pose a challenge.

Are practitioners today more likely to neglect their work-life balance in favour of patients?

This depends on the age group of the practitioners and whether they are owners or contractors. Veterans, baby boomers and Generation X practitioners generally struggle with work-life balance and have a tendency to put their patient first. Generation Y practitioners in contrast are very much aware of their work-lifestyle balance.

Many developed countries continue to see an increase in the demand for dental care. What about Australia? And is there a disparity regarding the coverage of dental health care between rural and urban areas?

There appears to be a shortage of qualified dentists, but it is all about the distribution of the professionals. There is indeed a disparity between the urban and the remote rural areas, and it usually needs a very special person to set up a private business in remote places. This can be a substantial financial and time commitment.

Is daily practice more stressful for clinicians working in rural areas compared with those in the cities?

Yes, it is. In most rural areas, the reality is that you are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is very difficult to escape from your professional status, and there is an expectation – whether right or wrong – that you are available even when you are shopping or out to dinner.

The challenge we have is to continue to provide a level of service to our patients with a workforce that places work-life balance at the forefront of their working career.

According to the Australian Work and Life Index, it is not only about how much you work, but also when it is taking place.

How can technology influence the work of clinicians? Are they actually time-saving tools as advertised or do they add even more stress, since practitioners have to constantly keep up and engage with the latest developments?

I once read the following: “Work harder and longer to save to purchase labour-saving devices”. How true is this? The competitive edge you have over another nowadays is up-to-date technology and procedures. It is patients that drive this prominence of technology in our business. We have to be seen to have the equipment that allows us to perform the latest procedures.

Of course, this increases the practice’s overheads, not only in the purchase of the technology, but also in the running costs to use the technology, including the costs to increase the skill sets of staff through learning and the maintenance of the technology.

Could you list some strategies to achieve healthy work routines?

The most effective strategy in the first instance is to recognise and accept that there is a work-life balance problem. Once it can be identified, it is then a matter of setting a series of strategies in place to manage the problem. These strategies may include the employment of a practice manager, mentoring other staff to take over certain aspects of the business, and increasing clinical staff to relieve work overload.

Certainly, these all come at a cost to the business, but the practitioner to determine what he or she wants out of the business. For those in the health care profession, we allowed the tail to wag the dog; it is time for practitioners to take control of their own strategy and destiny.

Thank you very much for this interview.