A good intention or genuine resolve?

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

A pparently, the sale of sal- 

ads were unreasonably low 

he explained. The 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 gritting your teeth on 
a cross-trainer, gritting 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 dis- 

quity themselves from all resolu- 
tions 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 nowa- 
days describe it. For some, even 
the pressure to deliver UDA targets 
didn’t stop them feeling quietly re- 
lieved 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 exclusive- 
ly about the size of their practice 

turnover. The twist these days is 
that really what success is all about? 

There was no doubt that the NHS 
dentist who had the highest UDA 

contracts and the volume of UDAs to 

qualify themselves from all resolu- 
tions 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.

Ten months later, I returned to 
the practice knowing his bravery 

had been rewarded with a demon- 
stration of faith from his patients, 
which had created a thriving private 
practice with a turnover of which he 
could only previously have dreamt. 
Upon my arrival, I asked his wife, 
the practice manager, how things 
were going. “Fantastically” she said. 
“She’s coming home and actually 
talking to our kids now.” Now that’s 
a measure of success.

If you haven’t already, you may 

find it interesting to have a flick 
through Jack Black’s Mindstore 
book and, in particular, the section 
about The Wheel of Life. This idea 

helps you think about eight dimen- 
sions of your life of which work is 
only one. Family is inevitably an- 
other and so are health, financial, 
social, personal development, atti- 
itude and spiritual.

For each element, give yourself 

a score out of ten for how comfort- 
able 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 in to 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 alto- 
tgether. 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 con- 
trol 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 practic- 
es 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 Gov- 
ernment 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 re-
tain 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 con- 
trol 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 den-
tistry 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.