Career opportunities and work–life balance in dentistry

By Dr Christine Bellmann

Dentistry is among the most rewarding professions and has a much broader scope of practice than ever before. Young dental professionals who have finished their studies and received their diplomas will have to individually decide on their career pathways. This choice is both exciting and difficult, as there are numerous options and opportunities to consider.

The transition from dental student to young working dental professional requires extensive adjustment. At university, students are told how to work, what to learn and what goals they need to fulfil. During practical work on patients, they are supervised by experienced dentists.

As a working professional, it is now up to each individual to assess patients on his or her own and to judge their needs and treat them accordingly. It is not just dental skills that are put to the test, however, as there are also other important skills that a working professional will need to have. These may be skills that are not taught at dental school, such as communicating with the patient, co-workers and assistants, as well as financial aspects and legal issues in the dental clinic. Acting correctly and appropriately is a substantial challenge, and may be overwhelming for some individuals. Being aware of those requirements is the first step to a successful transition.

Every graduate dental student has to decide where and how to embark on their professional careers. The majority of young dental professionals lay the foundation of their careers in private or public dental clinics, but some also remain at university to engage in research or teaching careers. Whichever way is chosen at this stage, it does not need to be the final decision. Paths can be changed and new ones explored, but the decision should be thought through, as the initial years in any profession form and influence one’s future career path.

Working in a dental office outside of university provides multiple options and opportunities. Dental practices come in every size and shape. There are small clinics and very large practices. Some have a specialisation or orientation, others are general dentistry practices. Each model has, for every individual, certain advantages and disadvantages, depending on one’s expectations and goals. A larger clinic, with more dentists, usually gives everyone more flexibility in relation to working hours and vacation planning, as well as in case of illness. Smaller teams can have the advantage of being forced to take more responsibility, from which great knowledge can be gained in living the concept of “learning by doing.”

Working in a clinic that has a certain specialisation will help a young graduate if he or she wishes to specialise in the same field, as knowledge can be gained during the daily workflow and, in combination with a postgraduate course, it can make the perfect choice. Choosing the right clinic can be challenging and sometimes the best choice is to go with one’s intuition.

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Purpose of specialisation
Many young dentists want to specialise in one of the many fields of dentistry. Once the decision has been made on the area in which to specialise, they should take their time to work out what is the right path of specialisation for them. What is their goal after specialisation? What is the specialisation to be used for: to work in a private dental clinic or establish their own clinic; or to enter into research and education at a university? And what is the goal for the practice?

There are many programmes on the market, and it is not always the best decision to choose the most expensive, most time-consuming one or the one that is the furthest away from home.

Since there are courses and post-graduate education programmes all around the world, many young dentists leave their home countries to gain experience and specialisation abroad. That can be an amazing experience and much can be gained from it. However, it is not the right choice for everyone, as it can hold more challenges and risks than might initially be expected. Studying or working abroad needs to be thought through and well planned, otherwise it can very easily end in a major disappointment. At first, working abroad may seem to be a great opportunity and exciting, and it certainly can be, but it may not turn out that way. An accurate assessment of the goals and the desired outcome of a life in a different country needs to be conducted.

Others may decide to open their own dental clinic or take over an existing one. Running one’s own business is a great opportunity to work in a comfortable work environment because it is self-created. Aligning a dental office to individual expectations and having a financially successful and well-run clinic can be challenging. Like any other business, strategies and standard operating procedures in various fields need to be established. It is not only the clinical abilities of the dentist that are important. Equally important are economic factors, such as analysis of the local conditions, human resource management, marketing strategies and legal guidelines.

With so many exciting opportunities in the dental field and the numerous options for how and where to work, it is easy to lose track of other important things in life. Time with family and friends or time for leisure activities is very important. Finding a healthy balance between fulfilling career goals and having rewarding downtime is the key to a happy and healthy life. It makes sense to take the time to reflect on the past and think about future expectations of life and, perhaps, write those down to keep them in mind. During these decision-making processes, of all the possible choices that have to be made, the most important factor that should be considered is one’s private life and what one wants in life.