Mr Smith, has the dental business changed much, and what are the main challenges of today compared with 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-life 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 during unsociable hours. What are the first warning signs? There are certain areas of the working life of a practitioner that, if not checked, may lead to a poor work-life balance. These stresses include managing a solo practice, missed appointments, patient dissatisfaction with treatment, insurance problems, employee turnover, as well as regulations of governmental agencies.

Lack of quiet time, such as not having breaks from your work, is also a sign that something is not right. So when the reign is burned-out as a result of the level of demands placed on the practitioner, 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: “We work harder and longer to save some money. But our money is burned-out as a result of the level of demands placed on the practitioner.” How true this is. 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 will allow 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 train for the level of 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 putting 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, all these come at a cost to the business, but the practitioner has to determine what he or she wants out of the business. For someone in the health care profession have 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.