Welcome message from Dr David H. Thomson, chairman of the local organising committee for the 36th Australian Dental Congress

There is something for everyone

Welcome to Australia’s new world city

Message from the Right Honourable, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Councillor Graham Quirk

With our strong proximity to Asia, Brisbane has an international feel. We recently hosted the G20 summit, ensuring further global recognition of our city. It is also passionate about digital innovation. We were the second city in the world to appoint a chief digital officer. Complementing this is our strong culture of entrepreneurship as demonstrated by our start-up culture, our strong retail offering, and our culture of food and fine dining.

Festivals as diverse as Brisbane and the Brisbane Comedy Festival punctuate our calendar, and the city hosts the internationally recognised Asia Pacific Screen Awards. This year, the Asia Pacific Cities Summit, one of the region’s premier business and civic forums, will take place here. This provides a platform for governments and business leaders to identify a common agenda, improve city governance, and promote trade and investment opportunities in the entire region.

We are looking forward to welcoming you to our cosmopolitan and tropical city.

There is something for everyone

An interview with Gary Smith, Melbourne

“it is very difficult to escape from your professional status”

Having been actively involved in the health care business for over 30 years, Melbourne-based practice manager 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. In his ADC mentoring session, titled “A work/lifestyle balance approach”, on Saturday, 28 March, Smith will address daily stressors and overall strategies to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance today international had the opportunity to talk to him about this subject, and why new technology might not necessarily help reduce the burden.

today international: 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 I 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–lifestyle 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 unsocial 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 stressors include managing a solo practice, missed appointments, patient dissatisfaction with treatment, insurance problems, encroachment, 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. Of course, the main sign is burn-out as a result of the level of demands placed on the practitioner.

How do new technologies 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 to purchase labour-saving devices”. 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 allows us to perform the latest procedures.

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 too long 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 the interview.