

## The Dentist in Society Part 5: A Meaningful Professional Journey



Throughout this extraordinary journey called life, we constantly search for meaning; this editorial will highlight several aspects related to the meaning of our professional journey.

Although our profession is relatively well defined, the mere definition of dentistry does not adequately describe what it means to be a dentist. It is my strong belief that it is difficult to define, and even more so, understand, the meaning of being a dentist before you become one (with the exception of second/third-generation dentists). It is perfectly fine to choose dentistry as a career for the wrong reasons, and some of those initial reasons and possible ulterior motives have been mentioned in previous editorials. The significance of properly understanding and managing your finances has been exhaustively discussed, but one should understand that monetary gains cannot be the reason for choosing a long-term profession if one aspires to a meaningful career. It is next to impossible to practice dentistry for decades without feeling that what you are doing is significant.

So what exactly does it mean to be a dentist? Actually, there is no definitive and objective meaning to being a dentist; it is up to you to derive its meaning. Being a dentist means different things to different people—from the profound sense of privilege (and the great responsibility that comes with it) of being able to better the quality of life of others, to the relationships formed with one's patients, to the deep enjoyment and pride that comes with the ability to perform technically complex procedures. In summary: You cannot practice dentistry without understanding the meaning of being a dentist, but this is something you will have to decide for yourself.

The second significant issue is overall mindset, with "positive" being the key word. At the beginning of one's career, the winning strategy comes from knowing what you do not know. As the years go by, modesty is likely to be replaced by humility that comes with knowledge, as it becomes clear that a work made by a human, regardless of experience and skills, may sometimes fail miserably in spite of the best efforts and intentions. However, most dentists tend to torment themselves over their failures despite our relatively phenomenal overall success rates. To put things in perspective,

look at the success rates of all other medical procedures in which artificial materials or prostheses are inserted into or used to rehabilitate the human body. None of those procedures comes close to having the high success rates and length of serviceability of dental procedures. Yes, it is crucial to reflect, internalize, and learn from failures, but the images of your failures should not be the last thing you visualize before falling asleep at night. While it is easier said than done, focusing on the numerous happy and grateful fellow human beings you have treated over the years will put things in context.

Last but not least is pacing for the long haul and avoiding burnout. Although I could not confirm who first uttered this statement, I do contend that to maintain the passion and the energy, a person should change professional direction or focus at least three to four times throughout his/her career. This is not a suggestion to sell your practice and relocate every decade or so. It simply illuminates the need to continue one's personal and professional growth. Such changes vary and can be a combination of different things, from dedicating time to teaching at your dental school, to enrolling in a long-term continuing education program and subsequently changing the clinical focus of your practice, to volunteering at a free clinic in an underserved area of your state or joining missions to underserved populations in foreign countries. These are experiences that will not only benefit your patients, but will enrich your soul and revivify your interest and enthusiasm to their highest level.

At the end of the day, it's the journey that counts, not the destination. Thus, understanding the significance of finding meaning in your personal professional journey, learning from failures but focusing on the successes, and finding new fields of interest may provide a recipe for a fulfilling lifetime experience.

Avishai Sadan, DMD

Editor-in-Chief

Avishai.Sadan@case.edu