

## *In Search of Perfection*

Every pediatric dentist knows the satisfaction of transforming a frightened, crying child into a smiling cooperative patient. Yet each practitioner also experiences frustrations unique to dental practice. Not only is there a constant need to relate with and manage others, such as patients, parents or employees, but also there is an ongoing need to produce with one's hands. It is in the nature of things, that problems happen due to factors beyond our control, yet as dentists we often berate ourselves for not achieving perfection.

Dentistry attracts people with particular personality traits. Temperamentally, dentists tend to be exacting, orderly individuals, with an almost compulsive attention to detail. Intellectually, they tend to be high achievers who are very demanding of themselves. They are selected by dental schools because of their intellectual achievement, and throughout years of schooling there is a heavy emphasis on cognitive learning. In the practice of dentistry, however, the demands are different, and a shift takes place in performance outcomes. Success in practice comes not so much from mastering intellectual problems, but from having the ability to achieve adequate psychomotor performance and having the personality to relate with people. Whereas selection and training are based on cognitive achievement, success in practice depends on psychomotor achievement and personality. A dissonance occurs with shifting expectations as the new practitioner confronts novel challenges and unanticipated stresses. Therein lie the seeds of professional frustration.

A young practitioner, faced with new responsibilities and bills to pay, attempts to start a promising professional career. For that person, it is

particularly frustrating when things don't go right. There is frustration when saliva contaminates an etched surface just prior to bonding, or when a difficult to place restoration for an unruly child fractures at completion. There is frustration when, in spite of best efforts, a child cries and that crying is viewed as failure to properly manage the child. For older practitioners there is disappointment that with time passing, things remain mundane and some career goals are still elusive. For both younger and older professionals there is the disappointment of not having achieved perfection, and there is an underestimation of the emotional price of that disappointment.

What then should be done to ameliorate the pressures of professional life? How can a practitioner mitigate the frustrations inherent in dental practice? First, by understanding, through recognizing that there are special pressures inherent in dental practice, and acknowledging that those pressures are experienced by our fellow pediatric dentists. Second, by cutting ourselves some slack, and not being so hard on ourselves, because self-acceptance ultimately produces a better practitioner, whereas unrealistic expectations wear us down. Finally, realizing that while we might not be able to achieve perfection, there is merit in striving for the ideal. It is the process of striving in life that is important. As Browning wrote in the poem entitled, Andrea del Sarto, "*man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for*". If we strive to do our best, we might never achieve perfection, but we will come very close to fulfilling our aspirations.