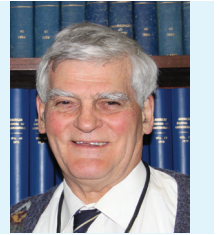


# Stress... or ataraxia\*?

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It has been noticeable that South African Dentists have enjoyed special opportunities for Continued Education towards the closing months of the year, SADA and Nomads Congresses being the major events, accompanied by meetings of several Special societies. All have provided opportunities to garner knowledge, whether to reinforce what is already known, or to excitedly open doors to new horizons in the discipline. The benefits of attending are legion, ranging from knowing you are at the cutting edge of Dentistry (a deliberate pun!) to the sheer joy of establishing or re-establishing contact with colleagues. Have you ever been to a dinner with fellow practitioners when Dentistry was not a major part of the conversation! The lectures, the demonstrations, the Trade Show, the entertainment, what a formula! But take a deeper perception... all those events and exposures and excitements combine to relieve to some extent the stress that it is our lot to endure. The change in routine, the different environment, the chance to select our next direction... all contribute to a sense of relative freedom from the rigours and dictatorship exerted by practising our profession.

For yes, Dentistry is indeed a high stress occupation. Many years are spent in education to become a dentist. Further years of experience and continuing education are needed to become a comprehensively good dentist. We operate in dimensions measured in microns...an infinitesimal slip leads to failure! At a recent function, our CEO, KC talked eloquently about choices that must be made everyday, choices that may affect our patients in serious ways, choices that may keep us from straying into unethical practices. Stress compounders!

And it starts when the budding practitioner is a student...look back at the February issue of the SADJ...a paper reporting on stress levels among, and their management by, dental students. There were some frightening statistics reported... students apparently nearing the end of their tether. BUT nevertheless coping in a surprising variety of ways. Many had contemplated changing their registration from Dentistry. Not surprising was the observation that the most common causes of stress were fear of failure and the demands of a heavy and unrelenting workload. Clinical year students reported increasing levels of stress as they handled greater numbers of patients. Oh my... a bleak picture!

I am told, not being a golfer, that even a fearfully poor round can be entirely forgotten if there was one... just one... excellent shot!

And that is the marvellous reprieve of Dentistry. One, just one...truly happy smile that our work has enabled, nay, that we have constructed and fashioned, will compensate for yards of stress. Robert Ricketts, one of the most influential orthodontists of our time, spoke about the mouth as the source of communication, of pleasure, of sustenance, of life itself. How privileged we have been to shoulder the stresses associated with achieving that great good feeling that we have a happy patient!

At this time of the year students are of course entering a period of enormous and understandable stress... how will they cope with the next examination, the next assessment? It will be the privilege of the profession to welcome these neophytes into our midst and it will be our responsibility to offer them the guidance and wisdom that years of experience have enabled us to deal with, and even to welcome, the stress of Dentistry. We exhort our patients to seek that elusive Smile... we should also enjoy its discovery!

To all those facing examination stress at this time, the most sincere wishes for sound preparation, fair papers, common sense and just reward.

And finally, there is some stress associated with editing a Journal... and I confess to being considerably stressed that the issues are so late, and I apologise.

Perhaps there may be some smiles when readers recognise some cogent point in the articles. That could be my reprieve to a state of ataraxia\*.

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\* **Ataraxia:** a state of calmness untroubled by emotional disquiet. (Oxford English dictionary)