

# Beyond the bottom line: Profit and purpose in dentistry

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Imagine standing at the intersection of care and commerce, where every decision, whether to invest in cutting-edge technology, choose a premium material or offer a discounted service, has the power to shape not only the success of your practice but the very essence of your profession. This is the reality of modern dentistry: a delicate balancing act between profitability and purpose. In South Africa, where disparities in access and affordability magnify these decisions, the stakes are even higher. As dentists, how do we navigate this complex terrain? How do we honour our ethical commitments while ensuring the sustainability of our practices? Most importantly, can dentistry redefine success in a way that harmonises these seemingly conflicting priorities? The honest answers may surprise us all.

## The balancing act in dentistry

The dental chair, once a place of straightforward treatment, has become the epicentre of a far more complex negotiation: balancing the escalating costs of modern care with the unchanging promise of patient-centred treatment. Today's practitioners face a daunting challenge. On one side are the soaring costs of advanced technologies, high-quality materials and the expectations of a discerning patient base. On the other side lies an ethical obligation to deliver care that is accessible, equitable and uncompromising in quality.

Across South Africa, where socioeconomic disparities are stark, this balancing act takes on an even greater weight. While some patients demand the latest cosmetic enhancements, others struggle to afford basic preventive care. The financial choices practitioners make are not just business decisions; they ripple outward, shaping the lives of patients, the reputation of the profession and the trust that forms its foundation. How does one weigh the cost of a cutting-edge CAD/CAM system against its potential to revolutionise restorative care? Can the benefits of using premium materials justify the strain it places on both patients' wallets and practitioners' sustainability? More importantly, can modern dentistry strike the elusive balance between profitability, quality and accessibility – or are these ideals fundamentally at odds?

## Philosophies in dentistry: Profit vs service quality

In the ever-evolving world of dentistry, profit is often cast as the antagonist in debates about professional integrity and patient-centred care. Yet, the truth is far more nuanced. Profit, when guided by ethical intent, is not the enemy of dentistry – it is its enabler. Without financial sustainability, practices cannot thrive, innovate or even exist. The challenge lies not in pursuing profitability but in ensuring that it aligns with the core mission of dentistry: to improve oral health and overall wellbeing.

Consider this: it is profitability that funds the acquisition of state-of-the-art equipment capable of producing faster, more precise diagnoses. It is profitability that allows

practitioners to invest in advanced materials, offering patients restorations that are both functional and aesthetic. And it is profitability that supports continuing professional development, empowering dental teams to refine their skills and adopt new treatment techniques. In this sense, profit acts as a driver of growth, pushing practices to stay at the cutting edge of care.

Yet, this is where the story takes a twist. The pursuit of profit can also tempt practices into prioritising high-margin procedures over essential care, straining the balance between financial success and service quality. A practice that invests in advanced equipment solely to maximise income risks alienating patients who perceive their care as transactional rather than compassionate. Similarly, focusing exclusively on cosmetic dentistry may generate impressive revenue but may sideline the needs of vulnerable populations requiring basic preventive care.

The tension between profit and service quality is not a binary choice, it is a spectrum that dentists must navigate with careful deliberation. Profit, when used as a tool for reinvestment and growth, elevates the profession. But when it becomes the sole metric of success, it risks undermining the trust and care that define dentistry.

## The ethical obligation to provide high-quality care

Dentistry is a commitment to excellence and therefore service quality is not a feature of the profession; it is its foundation. Patients entrust their oral health and, by extension, their overall wellbeing to dental professionals, expecting care that is safe, effective and enduring. Yet, in the intricate dance of balancing costs and benefits, the promise of high-quality care often finds itself under pressure, particularly in resource-limited settings such as South Africa.

Providing top-tier care comes with a price. High-quality materials, advanced technologies and skilled personnel are the cornerstones of excellence, but they come at a significant financial cost to both practitioners and patients. In urban centres, where affluence may allow for cutting-edge practices, the tension is often less pronounced. However, in rural or underserved areas, where financial resources are stretched thin, maintaining service quality can feel like an uphill battle. Here, practitioners may face difficult choices: adopt less expensive but lower-quality materials, compromise on certain technologies or reduce the frequency of patient follow-ups to lower costs.

Globally, the consequences of prioritising profit over quality have been documented. For instance, a 2020 study in the *Journal of Dental Research* examined the long-term outcomes of cost-cutting practices in dentistry. It found that using subpar restorative materials to reduce expenses led to higher rates of failure and patient dissatisfaction, ultimately eroding trust and increasing costs through repeat interventions. Such

findings underscore the risks of allowing financial pressures to dictate clinical decisions.

In South Africa, this tension is compounded by stark socioeconomic disparities. Public sector dentists often work with limited budgets, affecting their ability to provide the same quality of care as their private sector counterparts, not to mention potentially concerning instances of noncommitment to service by practitioners themselves. Meanwhile, private practitioners may feel pressure to prioritise high-margin treatments such as cosmetic dentistry over preventive or restorative care, inadvertently neglecting the broader health needs of their communities. The result is a growing divide in access to high-quality care, with vulnerable populations disproportionately affected.

Service quality must remain a non-negotiable standard in dentistry. To ensure this, the profession must resist the temptation to let financial constraints compromise clinical excellence. Practitioners must advocate for sustainable practices that balance financial realities with ethical obligations, striving to provide the same level of care for every patient, regardless of economic status.

As we continue, we delve deeper into the cost-benefit calculations surrounding materials and technology. Can cutting-edge advancements coexist with equitable care? The stakes could not be higher.

#### **Materials and technology: Cutting-edge or cost-effective?**

In modern dentistry, materials and technology represent both the pinnacle of progress and the source of profound dilemmas. Each innovation – whether a new composite material, a CAD/CAM system or 3D printing technology – promises to elevate patient outcomes. Yet these advancements come at a cost, leaving practitioners to grapple with an essential question:

when is the investment justified, and who ultimately bears the financial burden?

#### **Advancing patient outcomes with high-quality materials**

The allure of premium materials is undeniable. High-quality composites and ceramics offer durability, aesthetics and biocompatibility, setting new benchmarks for patient care. A well-crafted restoration using premium materials can last decades, reduce the risk of complications and enhance a patient's confidence with its lifelike appearance. However, these benefits come with a price tag that cannot be ignored.

For practitioners, the challenge lies in balancing the clinical advantages of these materials with their affordability for patients. Should a dentist always recommend the highest-quality material, even if it may strain a patient's budget? Or should they offer alternatives that, while cost-effective, may not meet the same standards of durability and performance? These choices are not merely clinical – they are deeply ethical, reflecting the practitioner's philosophy of care.

A 2021 study in the *Journal of Prosthetic Dentistry* demonstrated that premium ceramic materials used in crowns and bridges significantly reduced failure rates over five years compared to mid-tier alternatives. Yet the same study noted that the increased upfront cost often dissuaded patients, leading to compromises in their long-term oral health outcomes. This highlights a critical tension: the very materials that could prevent future complications are often inaccessible to those who need them most.

#### **Emerging technologies and their return on investment**

Parallel to the evolution of materials is the rise of transformative technologies. CAD/CAM systems, 3D printing and digital workflows are revolutionising the way dental treatments are planned and executed. These technologies enhance precision, reduce chairside time and allow for same-day



restorations, delivering undeniable benefits to both patients and practitioners.

However, these advancements come with steep financial implications. For many private practitioners, adopting such technologies represents a significant investment. The return on investment (ROI) is not always immediate, as it depends on patient demand, procedural volume and the efficiency gains achieved through their use. Studies analysing the ROI of CAD/CAM systems in private practices have shown mixed results. While high-volume practices often recoup their investment within three to five years through savings on laboratory costs and increased patient satisfaction, smaller practices may struggle to justify the expenditure. Moreover, the maintenance and training required to maximise these technologies can add hidden costs that further complicate the equation.

### The balancing act

For South African practitioners, the calculus is particularly challenging. On one hand, embracing advanced materials and technology is crucial for staying competitive in an increasingly sophisticated market. On the other, the socioeconomic realities of many patients make it difficult to pass on these costs without risking accessibility. The question practitioners must ask themselves is not just whether they can afford these investments, but whether they align with their philosophy of care. Are these tools and materials being used to genuinely enhance patient outcomes, or are they becoming symbols of a practice's prestige? The answer lies in thoughtful decision-making, where clinical need, patient priorities and financial realities intersect.

### Accessibility and equity in dentistry

Dentistry, while a cornerstone of healthcare, remains out of reach for many in South Africa. The promise of oral health for all often falters against an imposing barrier: cost. For vulnerable populations, where a dental appointment might mean sacrificing basic necessities, the idea of access to high-quality care feels like a distant luxury. This disparity challenges the profession to confront its dual identity as both a healthcare service and a business.

### The cost barrier for vulnerable populations

In South Africa, access to dental care is starkly divided along socioeconomic lines. The private sector, with its advanced technologies and well-resourced facilities, caters predominantly to patients who can afford out-of-pocket payments or comprehensive insurance plans. Meanwhile, the public sector, overburdened and underfunded, struggles to meet even the basic oral health needs of the majority of the population. According to a 2020 study on healthcare equity in South Africa, dental services in public facilities often face significant resource constraints, leading to long waiting times and limited treatment options. Preventive care, arguably the most cost-effective intervention, is frequently inaccessible, leaving patients to seek treatment only in emergencies when their conditions are more advanced and costly to manage.

The result is a cyclical problem. Vulnerable populations are denied access to timely care, leading to worsened oral health outcomes that compound the existing inequities. Children miss school due to untreated dental pain, adults face difficulties maintaining employment because of poor oral health, and systemic conditions linked to oral diseases escalate healthcare burdens. These realities underscore

the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how dental care is delivered and financed.

### Balancing affordability with sustainability

The challenge, then, is clear: how can practitioners make high-quality care accessible to all without compromising the financial sustainability of their practices? The answer may lie in innovative approaches that reimagine the economics of dentistry.

One promising model is sliding-scale pricing, where treatment costs are adjusted based on a patient's income. This approach ensures that patients are not excluded from care due to financial constraints while still allowing practices to recover costs. Another strategy is the integration of public-private partnerships. These collaborations enable private practitioners to extend their services to underserved populations, often subsidised by government funding or nonprofit organisations. Such initiatives not only expand access but also strengthen the social role of private dentistry, fostering goodwill and long-term patient loyalty.

Community outreach programmes also play a pivotal role in bridging the gap. Mobile dental clinics, funded through partnerships or donations, bring care directly to rural and underserved areas, reducing geographic and financial barriers. By focusing on preventive care and early interventions, these initiatives address oral health disparities at their root, benefiting both patients and the broader healthcare system.

### A call for innovation and commitment

Accessibility and equity in dentistry are not merely aspirational goals – they are ethical imperatives. The profession must move beyond traditional models of care delivery to embrace strategies that prioritise inclusivity. Practitioners have the power to lead this change, using their expertise and resources to advocate for systems that do not force patients to choose between financial survival and oral health.

As we explore the next section, we shift our focus to evidence-based decision-making, asking: what are the hidden costs of compromise, and how do long-term investments in quality and prevention pay off for both patients and practitioners?

### Evidence-based decision-making: The true cost of compromise

The discussion on accessibility and equity inevitably brings us to a critical consideration: the cost of compromise. In the pursuit of making dental care affordable, the temptation to cut costs is ever-present. Yet, as the profession strives to extend its reach to vulnerable populations and balance affordability with sustainability, it must also confront a vital question: What are the hidden consequences of cost-cutting measures, and how do they impact patients, practices and the profession as a whole?

### The long-term impact of cost-cutting

Compromising on materials and treatment protocols to save costs may seem like a practical solution in the short term, but the long-term consequences often tell a different story. Studies have consistently shown that the use of lower-quality materials or the omission of critical procedural steps can lead to higher failure rates, necessitating retreatments that are both costly and frustrating for patients and practitioners alike.

For instance, a 2021 study published in the International Journal of Prosthodontics examined outcomes of restorations performed using budget materials. The findings were sobering: while upfront costs were reduced by nearly 30%, failure rates tripled within five years, leading to increased retreatment needs and higher cumulative costs for patients. The study also highlighted how these failures erode trust in dental practitioners, as patients perceive repeated issues as a reflection of the provider's skill rather than the limitations of the materials used.

Beyond the financial implications, cost-cutting also poses ethical concerns. Providing suboptimal care to reduce expenses undermines the foundational promise of dentistry: to prioritise the patient's health and wellbeing. This is particularly concerning in underserved communities, where patients may already have limited trust in healthcare systems. Dentists must weigh the immediate financial savings of cost-cutting against the potential long-term damage to patient outcomes, professional reputation and the public's trust.

#### The value of preventive care

In contrast, preventive care stands out as a cornerstone of evidence-based decision-making, offering a cost-effective approach to managing oral health. By addressing issues before they escalate, preventive measures not only reduce the need for expensive interventions but also enhance patient satisfaction and outcomes.

Consider the impact of routine dental check-ups, fluoride treatments and patient education. A 2020 review in the Journal of Dental Research found that investing in preventive

care reduced the incidence of advanced caries by 60% in high-risk populations, saving significant costs associated with restorative or surgical procedures. For private practitioners, this presents an opportunity to position their practices as proactive, patient-focused entities, fostering loyalty and trust while minimising the economic burden on patients.

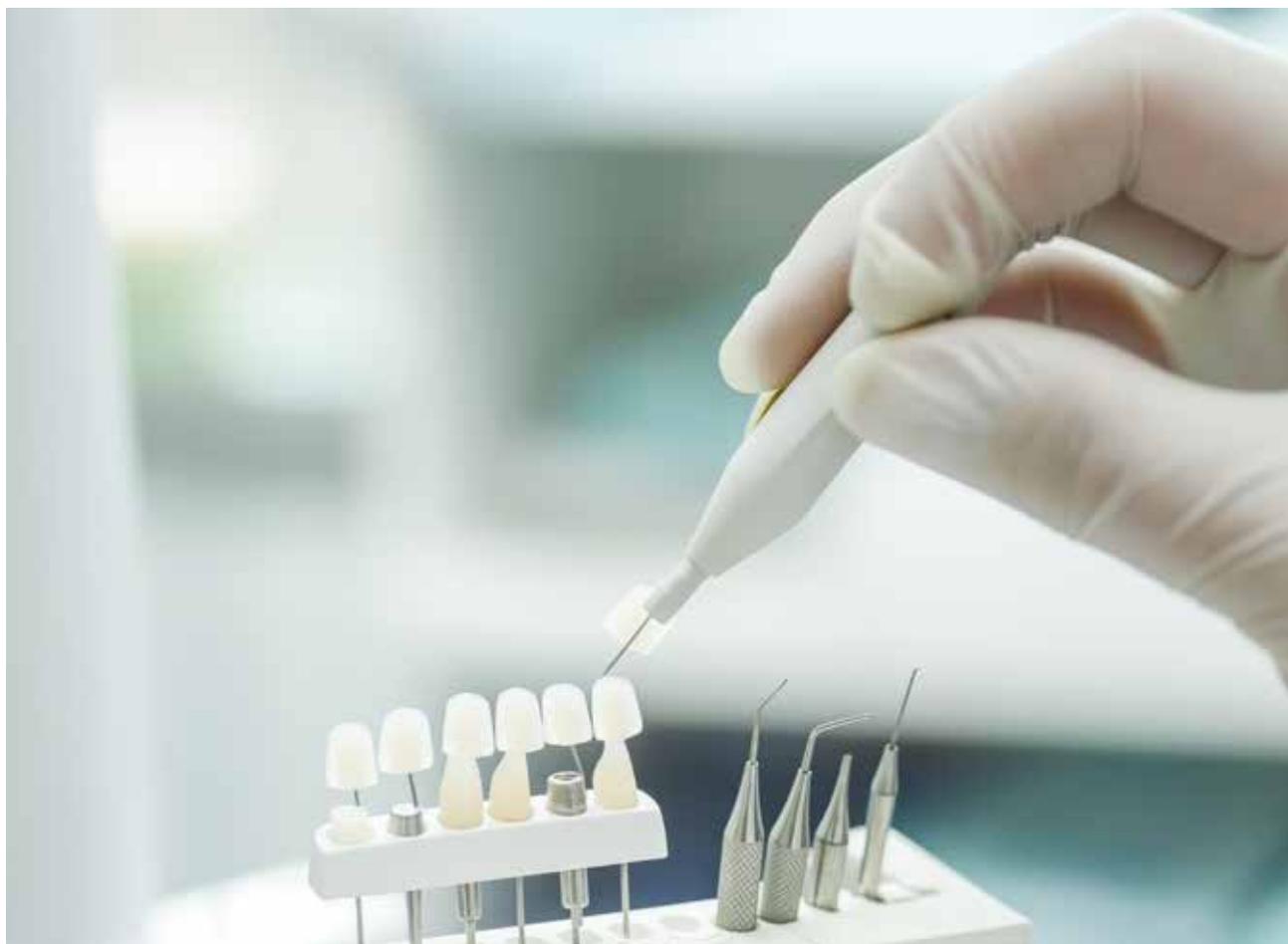
Preventive care is not just about reducing costs – it's about aligning with the profession's ethical and clinical priorities. It bridges the gap between accessibility and quality, ensuring that patients receive care that is both affordable and effective. For practices, it reinforces the philosophy of long-term planning over short-term savings, creating a foundation for sustainable growth and excellence.

#### A path forward

The decisions dentists make today will shape the profession for years to come. As they navigate the complex interplay of cost, quality and accessibility, evidence-based decision-making offers a guiding light. By resisting the lure of quick fixes and embracing strategies rooted in long-term outcomes, practitioners can uphold the values of their profession while building trust and sustainability.

#### Philosophical reflections: Dentistry as a profession and a business

Dentistry has always walked a fine line between its dual identities: a healthcare profession grounded in trust, care and ethics, and a business reliant on profitability for sustainability. This duality, while seemingly contradictory, is the very essence of what makes dentistry unique. The art lies not in choosing one identity over the other but in harmonising them to create



a practice that serves both patients and practitioners with integrity.

### Reaffirming the core values of dentistry

At its heart, dentistry is a profession rooted in service. The care we provide goes beyond repairing teeth or crafting restorations; it restores confidence, alleviates pain and often saves lives. Yet, the pressures of running a practice – a business – can blur these values. Financial sustainability is essential. Without it, practices close, innovation stalls and access diminishes. But when the scales tip too far toward profit as the primary driver, the profession risks losing sight of its purpose.

Consider the themes we've explored. The decisions around materials, technology and cost-cutting all stem from a balancing act between professional integrity and financial necessity. Each choice, whether to invest in cutting-edge equipment or offer more affordable alternatives, reflects the tension between serving individual patients and sustaining the broader practice. The question becomes: how do we maintain ethical standards while navigating these pressures? The answer may lie in embracing dentistry's duality as a strength rather than a conflict. By grounding every decision, financial or clinical, in the foundational commitment to patient welfare, practitioners can find a compass that guides them through the most complex dilemmas.

### Redefining success in modern dentistry

Perhaps the moment of clarity for dentistry lies not in reconciling its dual identities but in redefining what it means to succeed. Is success simply a matter of growing the bottom line, or is it something more profound? Could it be measured by the impact on community health, the trust patients place in their practitioners and the reputation of a profession that has always strived to do right by those it serves?

This is where the lightbulb moment for dentistry emerges: profitability and purpose are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are interdependent. A practice built on patient-centred care fosters loyalty, trust and referrals, creating a sustainable model for financial success. Similarly, a business that invests in ethical decision-making and community engagement builds a reputation that transcends immediate profit margins. In short, redefining success means seeing profit as the reward for good work, not the goal itself.

For South African dentistry, this reflection is particularly urgent. The disparities in access, the pressures of cost and

the challenges of equity demand that the profession takes a stand. By reaffirming its core values and reimagining success, dentistry can become a beacon of hope in a healthcare landscape fraught with challenges. Dentistry is at a crossroads. The choices made today will shape the profession's legacy tomorrow. Practitioners, educators, policymakers and industry leaders must come together to embrace a vision of dentistry that honours its roots while adapting to the realities of modern practice. Profitability and patient-centred care are not enemies, they are allies when pursued with intention and integrity.

The path forward is not just about making better decisions, it is about reimagining what it means to thrive as a dental professional. By weaving together the lessons of cost, benefit and equity, we can forge a profession that remains true to its promise: serving patients with excellence, compassion and purpose.

### Conclusion

Dentistry, at its core, is a profession defined by balance between science and art, innovation and tradition and, most critically, profitability and purpose. This editorial has explored the intricate dance between cost and benefit, shedding light on the challenges practitioners face while affirming the values that guide the profession. The path forward requires thoughtful decisions grounded in evidence, ethics and empathy. By embracing dentistry's dual identity as both a business and a calling, practitioners can create practices that are not only sustainable but deeply impactful. The true measure of success is not just the numbers on a ledger but the trust we build, the care we provide and the communities we uplift. In honouring this balance, we ensure the future of dentistry remains bright, resilient and true to its noble purpose.

### Further reading

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## CPD questionnaire on page 506

The Continuing Professional Development (CPD) section provides for twenty general questions and five ethics questions. The section provides members with a valuable source of CPD points whilst also achieving the objective of CPD, to assure continuing education. The importance of continuing professional development should not be underestimated, it is a career-long obligation for practicing professionals.

