Whenever the words ‘anxious’ and ‘dentistry’ appear in the same sentence it is usually in relation to apprehensive, nervous patients and not to the mental state of the dentist. However, many dentists find their chosen profession extremely stressful. One of the most commonly cited stressors is the constant drive for technical perfection with any perceived inability to carry out work to a sufficiently ‘good enough’ standard, leading to stressful feelings of negativity and inferiority. The truth of the matter is that the vast majority of dentistry performed these days is good enough and yet we are bombarded with articles, books, DVDs and presentations by ‘gurus’ that feature technical work of staggering excellence. It’s not surprising, therefore, that the ‘average’ dentist can start to feel a little undermined by it all. This feeling of not quite cutting the mustard is, for obvious reasons, difficult to own up, not only to colleagues but also to yourself and clearly to your patients. In most cases, dentists will quietly reflect on the situation rationally and take action to improve their skills and rectify any perceived deficiencies.

Any such loss of confidence in one’s own abilities is one thing but what is far more unhealthy, in my opinion, is the almost pathological quest for perfection which, when combined with all the various trials and tribulations associated with running a business as well as maintaining a happy, healthy personal life, can create a potential timebomb, which can all too easily go off with disastrous consequences. Psychologist Don Hamachek described two types of perfectionism. So-called normal perfectionists derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort. In a positive form, perfectionism can provide the driving energy that leads to great achievement. But, as Hamachek pointed out, there is also a dark side to perfectionism. Neurotic perfectionists are unable to feel satisfaction because, in their own eyes, they never seem to do things well enough to warrant that feeling of satisfaction.

These latter perfectionists strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals measuring their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment. This brand of perfectionism can be very damaging, and is a risk factor for obsessive compulsive personality disorder, eating disorders, social anxiety, social phobia, self-harm and clinical depression as well as physical problems such as chronic stress – none of which sit easily with the notional ideal of a well-balanced, confident, competent dental professional. In terms of dental practice, the resulting anxiety and low self-esteem can be manifested in a number of different ways. It can take the form of procrastination when it is used to postpone tasks, for example, ‘I can’t start this treatment until I know the “right” way to do it’ and self-deprecation when it is used to excuse poor performance or to seek sympathy and affirmation from other people ‘I can’t believe I don’t know how to get this right. I must be stupid, how else could I not be able to do this?’

Hardly surprising then that perfectionism is often marked by low productivity as individuals lose time and energy on small irrelevant details of larger projects or mundane daily activities. This can lead to depression, alienated colleagues, and a greater risk of mishaps. Another psychologist, Miriam Adderholt-Elliot, described five characteristics of perfectionism that contribute to underachievement: procrastination, fear of failure, the all or nothing mindset, paralysed perfectionism and workaholism. Therapists attempt to tackle the negative thinking that surrounds perfectionism, in particular the ‘all-or-nothing’ thinking in which the client believes that an achievement is either perfect or useless. They encourage clients to set realistic goals and to face their fear of failure. Dentistry is particularly tricky when it comes to dealing with perfectionism. We are constantly urged to aim for it and yet dental outcomes, by their very nature, are very often unpredictable. Clearly, it is our professional responsibility to aim at doing work to the best of our capabilities and we are obliged to strive to keep up-to-date, be the best that we can but, at the same time, we should not beat ourselves up for not achieving perfection every single time, and we shouldn’t make ourselves ill striving for something that may simply not be achievable.

For all you obsessive perfectionists out there, relax a little more and remember the old saying: ‘perfection is the enemy of very good’.