

# Long Timers, Any Regrets Looking Back?

*Townies share what they've learned over their years of practicing and what they'd do differently*

For those who have practiced 20-plus years, especially those nearing retirement or already retired ... any regrets in the way you ran your practice? Would you have gone bigger, or smaller, with the wisdom of hindsight? Work/life balance? Were you ever burned out and hating dentistry or has it been good for you? Do you look back and find you got a little stale and in a rut? Did you try lots of new things later in your career and regret doing it? Or was that the icing on the cake of a long career? For those fully retired—do you or did you wish you could have pattered along for a few more years in a part-time, low-volume, low-stress way? ■

3/24/2016

**raclo**

Member Since: 08/17/05

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I practiced small and do not regret that. I do my own hygiene and maybe I would have considered hiring a hygienist if I had it to do over. A large, overly busy practice would have burned me out. You need to know your limitations. ■

3/24/2016

**hendoc4ct**

Member Since: 04/12/11

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Well, if practicing 20 years makes me a long-timer, then I either have to start lying about how many years I have practiced (25) or thinking about retirement (not going to do that, because I love what I do!)

Three chairs, low volume. My biggest regret was not getting the right consultant/coach to help me learn earlier in my practice. When I started with coach Ron Arndt (now retired), my practice just took off and my stress went way down, because he taught me how to be a leader, a boss. Once that happened, dentistry got easier.

The keys to no regrets (in my book):

1. Learn every day. Take CE and add it to your practice. Make it so that if anyone asks you, "Have you ever heard of such and such or so and so?" you can say, "Yes, I read/saw/heard about that, and I know something about it. May not do it, or ever have done it—but I know of it." It will make you a better doctor.
2. Do what you want to do. If endo sucks for you, don't do it! If surgery sucks, don't do it!

I have found that massive debt that does not add to your bottom line is what causes this. If you've got to pay a lot of bills, then the job owns you; not too many bills, then you own the job. Then it's not a job—it's your life, and you like it. ■

3/24/2016

**nosilverdotcom**

Member Since: 05/03/03

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I could have been more aware of the market, which would have made me available to more new patients, but I still would have built a practice around personal dental care versus marketplace care. I am in a large, competitive market and as the commercial practices have grown in number, our practice has also grown. That's either due to the awareness of dentistry they create with their marketing or with the problems they create with their style of practice. ■

3/24/2016

**Tom Mitchell**

Member Since: 02/16/04

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I've also been out almost 28 years and owned a small home office for 15 years. (Three years after I graduated.) Yes, I got to spend lots of time with my kids in their early years. However, I

**Epis Quattlebomb**

Member Since: 07/09/04 |

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elected to walk away, because I was barely able to eke out a living from it. (Wife worked also.) I've been working for a privately owned group office for the past 11 years and haven't looked back since. Would have done it from the get-go if it had been available to me at the time. The 15 years I owned prevented me from contributing to my retirement and I've had to make up for lost time during the past decade. Guess it was analogous to a bad divorce. At 55, I'm probably looking at putting in another 12 years (when SS kicks in) then I'll hopefully be able to call it quits and enter a very meager retirement with my wife. Oh, well—could be a lot worse. ■

3/24/2016

**John Basile DDS**

Member Since: 11/10/01  
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I practiced in a small two-chair office for 20 years. Stupid. I was busy from Day One, was too cramped but made it work. Overhead was 38–40 percent, so I brought home \$300K+ for a long time, on four days a week.

Bought building and moved to five-op practice six years ago and all I can say is, “WTF was I thinking?” I should have been out of the two-chair place a few years in. Now I have room to breathe and a great hygiene staff, and I make way more than I ever did in small place. Overhead near 50 percent, but collections up 30–38 percent or so. Did implant training at 56; now I am even busier and more profitable. So, I say get that implant training—ortho, too, maybe sleep medicine, and get out of fill-and-drill ASAP. The real money is in implants and ortho as I see it. (OK, maybe endo, if you can stand it.) And down to three and a half days. ■

3/24/2016

**Dr Mac Lee**

Member Since: 04/14/00  
Post: 28 of 358

Interesting and very important thread. May I ask what made you think of designing and posting it? What do you personally want to get out of it? ■

3/24/2016

**raciro**

Member Since: 08/17/05  
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I was curious about what might come out of these questions. As you can see, the responses are somewhat different from many of the usual posts on DT. I thought there might be some wisdom out there that doesn't always come through in other posts.

Nearly all the dentists I've known in my 31 years absolutely do not fit the “DT” mode. Most I know came into this profession expecting to earn about three times what an elementary school teacher earns and to be one of the “rich” guys in town and be satisfied with that.

Few dentists I know earn much more than \$200K, and doing so is not a goal. Many of us consider a big, busy office the definition of hell. Of course, there is a whole new reality these days with debt for education and setting up a practice.

I am 60 and plan to work my easy pace for 10 more years or so. I do have my own regrets, however, and wanted to see how others felt. I, too, went on autopilot for a decade, liking what I was doing but letting the business slide. My early mentors taught me, right or wrong, that running a dental practice as a business was bordering on the unethical.

These were guys who thought our world of professionalism ended when advertising became legal. I don't share all those opinions, but in hindsight I see it probably hurt my practice to have followed that line of thinking for the most part. I hoped for and see there are some very well-thought-out replies. I also hoped it would be valuable for younger dentists to see this perspective. ■

3/24/2016

**keepin it simple**

Member Since: 10/13/11  
Post: 47 of 358

I see a lot of people who stayed small and had no problem maintaining the course for 30 years or more. I wonder if the people going balls to the wall can really stay the course for that long. Maybe the tortoise really can beat the hare in the end. ■

3/24/2016

**brucebarrowdds**

Member Since: 09/27/01

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Concentrate on those aspects of dentistry that give you the most satisfaction. Very early, I found that full dentures were not for me and had no hesitation in referring those patients to my colleagues. I enjoyed endo, crown and bridge, routine extractions including third molars, RPDs and normal restorative cases.

I was content to refer out complex endo, all perio surgery, complex impactions, implant surgery and F/F cases. Those specialists, in turn, referred many good families back to me. It may sound boring to many, but one becomes very efficient with procedures that are rewarding and enjoyable. Out of the 70+ dentists in town, we had perhaps four offices leaning toward "smile designs, etc." and frankly it wasn't a rip-roaring success for them—lots of PITA patients. I was comfortable with four days per week, a full-time hygienist and our three-operator, 1,000-square-foot office.

We had a small partnership income from four rentals in the basement, but it was basically set up with individual dental spaces and sharing the two public bathrooms and a conference room. Each dentist could design, equip and decorate in his own style. No battles over supplies, bonding agents, equipment brands, etc. It was our KISS approach that allowed the partnership to survive for 30+ years.

I wondered if would I change anything if I had to do it over again? Not a chance. My leisure time was more than adequate. I had time for sports cars, motorcycles, 2,700 hours as a Cessna pilot, hunting, fishing, overseas travel, etc. My golf game sucks to this day but I never worked that hard at it. Invested primarily in IRAs, Keogh, stocks, etc., knowing nada about real estate investments. Survived two stock market crashes and am now paying taxes on the required minimum distributions from the tax-deferred accounts. One can live quite well on a conservative retirement plan that is continuing to increase in value.



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I would suggest that paying off debt such as school loans and avoiding loans on cars, etc., should be high priorities. Loans for practice improvements are good investments. The freedom to live your desired lifestyle with ease is hard to beat. I have enjoyed all the ideas on this topic—thanks for posting.

P.S.: I do have a year left on my 2012 BMW loan, which makes sense at 1.9% APR. ■

3/25/2016

**JustNat**

Member Since: 08/16/03  
Post: 204 of 358

This is a fascinating thread and a great read. I love seeing the dichotomy of those who love it and wish they'd done more or done things earlier, and then those who wish they'd done something else or gotten out earlier. There doesn't seem to be much middle ground!

I'm not an old-timer—only 14 years in as a dentist (but started assisting in 1993, so in dentistry total for 23 years now). I'm one who is trying to get out, or at least change what I'm doing. I love reading Kirk's posts. (So glad to see you again; I'd often wondered where you'd gone.) I like seeing people who recognized things weren't fitting right for them and managed to find something that did suit them.

For me, finally started working at the dental school with the students last spring, and something clicked. I've never had a job that I looked forward to going to like I do with this one—and I've done it all: associate in private group, corporate group, HMO group, solo owner, public health. I truly enjoy my interactions with these students; they inspire me, they energize me. It is exciting. It is fun. So now, the hard part is transitioning into doing that full time and making a living at it, rather than part time and making peanuts.

But I'm trying to be patient, be available and be flexible and keep letting the powers that be know that I'd like to do more. I hope it works. I'll never get rich doing anything in dentistry at this point, but if I can just be comfortable and enjoy what I do, that's all I'm asking for. ■

4/5/2016

**The Admiral**

Member Since: 10/01/04  
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Hi, Nat. I've got some coaching questions for you (if you're up for playing along). You mentioned that you tried it all, but never had a job that you looked forward to going to. Specifically, what is it that's different? What values and passions are here that weren't there before? When you think about the other things you've done, what aspects of those jobs were really fulfilling, what aspects were neutral and what aspects were really hard on you?

I'm going to assume (and correct me if I'm wrong), but is it safe to assume that the variety of previous jobs all felt a little bit different? There was something about public health that was right for you and you didn't get in the other jobs (but something still felt wrong), and there was something about solo practice that felt right (different from the public health but other things felt wrong).

If so, pinpoint the parts of the jobs that were the high points. How do you collect and amplify the best of each experience so you can put it all toward a positive future experience?

Sometimes, this is a tough game. If you get stuck, start to make a list of your passions. Things that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow." They might be challenging, but you lose yourself in the flow of the task. Once you have a list, start to group them and look for common themes. What type of really challenging work do you absolutely love to do? (Mastering a musical instrument, training for a marathon, learning to paint, creating a beautiful garden?) Look for the similarities between what you are passionate about, and what really worked for you in your history of experiences, and in your current (most fulfilling) experience. Then use that information to craft your own future. ■

4/5/2016



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