

0.006 says it all

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Just what is it about time that is so odd in dental practice? Time always has a nasty tendency to slip through our fingers but in practice it seems to have the curious quality of bending and distorting, of being one length for some tasks and quite another duration for others.

Take check-ups for example. Leaving aside the question of whether they should be at intervals of six-months, one year, six years or one decade, does it really seem like six months since Mr Jenkins last walked through your surgery door and sat smiling, or sulking, in your chair? How do those six months compare with the half-hour you have just spent explaining the pluses and minuses of having a full gold crown to the previous patient who clearly couldn't see the advantages? Which seemed the longer time? Odd isn't it?

Of course the six-monthly, or annual, time interval seems slightly easier to manage mentally as we all know that 'time just flies by'. Consequently you can trot out the usual 'I can't believe that Wimbledon was on the last time I saw you' or 'but it seems like only yesterday we were discussing the size of turkey you needed for the Christmas dinner, and here we are again in July'. It's the 'long' three-quarters of an hour that is more difficult to explain. Why is it that the first half of a football match, or two chapters of a good book can flow past in the flash of a boot or a flip of a few pages when forty-five minutes in easing a denture can seem like a lifetime sentence?

Not that the problem is only ours to ponder. 'How long will it last?' asks the patient of any particular treatment you are advocating for their consideration. You are tempted to use the rejoinder 'I have absolutely no idea', but think better of it in anticipating making a more positive impression. Although I well remember our own family dentist saying 'look, the good Lord made you and you're not going to last for ever so don't expect anything I do to last any time,' which, even as a youngster, I sensed to be a less than reassuring guarantee. Instead we say things like, 'oh, it should last a good long time' or 'well, I'd say we're probably looking at a number of years here', hoping that the patient isn't

going to ask the follow-up question of exactly what 'a good long time' or 'a number of years' really means.

It is rather the same with projecting ahead when trying to persuade patients of the benefits of prevention. Psychologists warn us that telling children that if they smoke or take drugs or skateboard on the motorway they'll be lucky to reach old age means nothing. Partly because if reaching old age means being as grumpy as you they'd rather not bother anyway and partly because the concept of that much time ahead is impossible to grasp. Similarly for oral health advice too. Can an eight-year-old really conceive the advantages of holding on to their adult molars into their seventies by taking extra care brushing every morning, when the tantalising possibility

canals out of four, and so on. And can you see what's going to happen next? Once every five years we're going to be asked to 'prove it', or at least to have the proof available, for those five times fifty hours. Two hundred and fifty of those 0.006s of a week. It's the same as that unimpressed eight-year-old really isn't it? No competition between a toothbrush in a bathroom basin and Game Mate Alien Evaporator, between what's happening now and what might happen in x years time. Trust me, those five years are going to be up in smoke before you can say verifiable hours, just like the six months since last Bonfire Night or lounging by the pool in the Algarve.

Not that it is all grief. Time can play nice bendy tricks too, when you get

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of spending longer on computer games looms large?

Then again, what of continuing professional development? CPD, life long learning, is that the same for us? Another twist in the force-field of the time-dental practice-where-did-that-morning-go continuum? The idea of 50 hours a years is so deceptively simple isn't it? About one hour a week, one hour out of how many? To be precise, 168, or 0.006 of our Monday to Sunday existence. But that takes no account of the other, cumulative 0.006 fragments that we spend sleeping, shopping, washing, being moody about cold-calling mobile phone companies, simply disbelieving that they've passed when we've only managed to ream two root

engrossed in some pleasantries. Like the time when you are in conversation with a youngster in the chair who is busy telling you all about their pet tortoise, or the time when Mrs Williams confides in you that her new dentures have made such a huge difference to her eating that she now feels so much better and has more energy and verve than she can remember for many a long year. Well, apparently nice tricks. Smiling out of your warm feeling as you raise your head, you glance at your nurse and note she is grimacing and tapping her wrist where her watch might be. 'Do you,' her expression clearly conveys, 'have any idea what time it is?' Well, it's a fraction of another 0.006 of a week - but how fast that one went!