

I'll just open the envelope...

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Awards ceremonies now seem to be ten a penny. Why do we bother?

'And the winner is...' nervously clutching the envelope, which is usually gold and ostentatiously larger than the average-sized, unwelcome manila version that plops on the front door mat informing you that the electricity is about to be cut off, the 'dental celebrity' peers through his or her half-moon reading specs and makes someone's evening special.

A cacophony of excited clapping and whooping erupts from the table in the corner as the practice team from Upper Walton-in-the-Valley leap to their feet in energised acknowledgment of their victory. And rightly so. There is, after all, nothing wrong in marking good achievements and recognising excellent accomplishments but it does make one wonder from time to time what the real purpose is. Plus there is a sneaking suspicion that some practices are now grooming team members especially with award ceremonies in mind.

Not that we should be surprised, we live in a competitive world. Witness the anxious parent, usually but not exclusively on the maternal side, ushering their young charge into the surgery for 'tooth blanching' or 'orthodontistry' in readiness for an audition for a highly prized television role. Or the equally dramatic situation in which a young 'pom-pom' twirler arrives on a Monday morning with several incisors missing thanks to the wayward spinning of a baton from a rival outfit in Ilford. We want the best for us and ours and making sure that we look our best is a key factor. So, when it comes to recruiting and appointing practice personnel, who's to say that the less than objective 'how do they look?' box doesn't get the odd ticking, with a view to how they might shape-up on the podium on the all important prize night?

And in the same way that some people enter every competition going on cereal boxes, soap powder cartons and baked bean tins, could there be practice teams researching away on all the possible categories for which it might be open to them to apply? Training needs would include acquiring such vital skills as form-filling while giving

maximum exposure to practice good points. A simple question such as, 'How many people work in the practice?' can be answered quite simply - six, but with the eye of experience the response can take up a whole other side of A4. 'Of the caring team members in Smile More Practice, three are highly trained, dedicated, caring dentists whose every thought and action is directed towards patient comfort and beneficial treatment outcome...' You see where I'm coming from on this one?

It isn't just the effect at the ceremony itself, one suspects, but the lingering state of celebrity that goes with it. Interviews in the local paper, mentions in the parish magazine, whispers in the newsagents as a team member glides through. The practice mantelpiece (in the case of 'converted' properties) or the prestigious new trophy cabinet (in the case of 'designer' premises) groan under the weight of prizes, medals

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and honours which tumble down the shelves surrounded by multicoloured sashes and bedecked with badges, rosettes and favours. Cut-glass crystal rose bowls, engraved lumps of Welsh slate, giant Perspex teeth and models of toothbrushes crafted from Finnish-wood toothpicks all jostle for space in the gaze of bewildered and impressed patients crowding into the 'practice of the year'.

Which brings us neatly on to the other slightly disturbing aspect of singling-out the best, that of categories. Once the obvious ones have all been used up, the list starts to look a bit thin. 'Spittoon cleaner 2004' might indeed acknowledge the tireless work of someone who is manically dedicated to removing the swillings of the hoards from white ceramic surfaces, but do we really want to be reminded of such rubber-gloved manoeuvres as we sip our

sparkling aperitifs or nibble at, oh yet another, canapé?

The down side to all this glitz, as with any first-past-the-post system, is that for every winner or photo-finisher there are a field of other folks hanging around feeling either very irritated or just plain alienated. We all pretend that such beauty pageants don't matter but it is only human nature to ponder on what we might do with the prize money or how we'd spend the tokens. Then again, apart from the obligatory certificate in a clip-frame to join the others on the waiting room wall, what benefits can a dental team really expect to win that they can all enjoy? Sadly, not many oral health awards come with a holiday to the Canaries or a Caribbean cruise, and besides, would you really want to be seen beach-side with all your work colleagues, or making a fool of yourself with deck quitoes in full view of the least merry member of the practice ensemble?

Since for the most part, to date, it has been up to the practice to decide whether or

not the whole oeuvre suits it or not, there is perhaps not too much to be concerned about. If it's not for you, don't enter. Now however, a further complication heaves into view, the achievements that are 'patient' nominated or voted for by 'members of the public'. Quite outside one's control and without previous knowledge the *This is Your Life* type person could descend on Smile More Practice with news of hither-to undreamed of fame and fortune. But if this sends shivers down your spine take comfort in the knowledge that the really competitive practices will already be out there, encouraging the man on the Clapham omnibus to 'write in' on their behalf.

Now, where was I?...If I can just find my specs...The winner is...'

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