



Yaqoub Imran, Student Editor, *BDJ Student*

RACING FOR PERFECTION

In 14 weeks I'll be on a start line somewhere in the centre of the 'beautiful' city of Birmingham gearing up to run a half-marathon. Despite all my training, my stomach will still be tight with nerves and, undoubtedly, alongside the other 10,000 runners I'll be thinking, 'Was signing up for this back in January really a good idea?'

Before the race has even started, I will be stood there surrounded by doubts. I will feel unqualified, unprepared, and simply... scared: scared of not achieving a personal best (PB). In other words, scared of failure. Nerve-wracking!

Why am I telling you all of this? Well, because the start line environment that I have described has parallels to many dental school experiences. Think back to your first week as a dental student, or the moments before that 'head and neck anatomy exam', or the wait before you welcome in your patient who needs an 'upper right 7 root canal treatment'. Often in these moments we're surrounded by doubts. Will I be able to deliver? Nerve-wracking, right?

Such feelings of doubt can become all-consuming. However, let's put this into perspective. Getting to the start line of a race is in itself an achievement. By having undergone a disciplined training programme over weeks, and then on the day itself wrestling those pre-race nerves, you have already achieved a degree of success. Similarly, getting into dental school is in itself a huge achievement. By being disciplined during your academic journey and then wrestling through the day-to-day demands of the course, you are achieving success on a daily basis.

But, often lurking in the shadows of this success is an inclination that needs examining: the need for perfection.

However, is this inclination healthy or realistic?



It's difficult. As a dental student, we would have achieved close to perfect grades and interviewed to a somewhat perfect standard. We have been in touching distance to this idea of perfection throughout our academic career, so it's natural to continue seeking it through the pursuit of perfect grades, designing the perfect denture or carving the perfect composite

restoration. But can perfection ever be achieved or is it an imaginary 'finish line' that can never be crossed? Is this pursuit of perfection toxic? Does it lead to unmanageable stress?

Nervous runners on the start line may calm themselves down simply by resolving to try their best instead of fixating upon winning or achieving a PB. In other words, by not fixating on perfection. But, how do we as dental students calm ourselves from the stresses of pursuing perfection in our field?

The answer may be to *not* let 'the perfect' be the enemy of 'the good'. To be clear, not pursuing perfection does *not* mean we should accept mediocrity. Instead, we should avoid falling into the stressful trap of pursuing the impossible; we should focus on trying our very best to deliver great patient care consistently; trying our best to be as compassionate, as professional, and of course as competent as we can possibly be.

So, the first step to avoid racing for perfection is to accept that there is no finish line. Therefore, ask yourself – is it *really* worth stepping up to the start line of a race that you know will never end?

Sounds exhausting to me. I think I'll stick to my half-marathon in 14 weeks and give that my best shot... What more could you ask for? Just don't say perfection. It simply doesn't exist.

Yaqoub Imran ■

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41406-024-1361-3>