

“I haven’t cut back my hours; I just wanted release from the obligations of owning a business. I enjoy my work and the relationships I’ve built with my patients.”

Dr Armando Menezes, former owner, Forum Dental Centre Belmont

Dr Menezes was relieved to relinquish the stress of staff management.

When you no longer want to run your own practice but are not quite ready to retire, is it possible to just step back? By Frank Leggett

In the wings

Running your own practice is a rewarding experience, particularly watching your business grow while improving the oral health of your clients. On the flip side, it’s also stressful, time-consuming and can be difficult to disengage mentally from the business operations.

When it all becomes a bit too much, one option is to sell the business but stay at the practice as a general dentist. This allows a mature dentist to ease into retirement without suddenly stopping a lifetime’s work. For dentists who aren’t ready to retire but feel the need to sell, it lifts the burden of business ownership while allowing them to concentrate on what they love—dentistry itself.

Ease into retirement

Dr Michael Levitt arrived in Australia as a refugee from Russia in 1976 and by 1979 was running his own practice in the heart of Sydney’s CBD. Despite earning degrees in Russia and Germany, and passing the dental board exam in Australia in 1978, he found it difficult to gain new patients due to his Russian accent. Over time, however, he managed to build an impressive multicultural client base and a successful practice.

After 40-plus years of operation, Dr Michel Levitt’s Dental Care was

sold to Dr Lucia Dixon last April and rebranded as Sydney Mint Dental. Practice manager Linda Tang stayed on to aid in the transition.

“About 30 dentists wanted to buy my practice but I sold to Lucia because we share the same philosophy,” says Dr Levitt. “I’m 75 now but I stayed on to help with the transition. I work two days a week and introduce my patients to Lucia. She is a very good dentist—I would have locked the door and sold the building rather than sell to a bad dentist.”

Dr Levitt was due to fully retire in September but Dr Dixon requested he stay on for another six months, working one day a week.

“I love dentistry,” says Dr Levitt. “It’s my life. Even though I’m involved in another project, working with autistic spectrum kids, I will keep seeing patients and enjoying my work.”

New experiences

Sometimes practice ownership can be a barrier to realising your full potential. Dr Yeganeh Akbari is an exceptional dentist but always thought she had more to offer.

Dr Akbari founded Smile Creation in Bundoora, Victoria, in 2002. She purchased new technology, offered additional services and employed a part-time dentist to work alongside her. Within two years, clients had to book their appointments six weeks

in advance.

“Smile Creation was an all-consuming part of my life,” she says. “In all honesty, 10 years went past in the blink of an eye.”

Two events changed the direction of Dr Akbari’s life. Her best friend was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 29, and later, a routine medical procedure forced Dr Akbari to take a month off work. “I realised my business was my first thought when I woke and my last when I went to bed,” she says. “But there were so many things I wanted to do—I wanted to live my life to its full potential.”

Dr Akbari sold her practice in 2011. She continued working there for a year and then spent 30 months based in Haifa, Israel, volunteering at the Bahá’í World Centre. During this time she was completely away from dentistry, instead using her fluent English and Persian in an administrative and research capacity.

Smile Creation changed hands while she was overseas but when Dr Akbari returned in 2014, the new owner was happy to have her back on staff. She now works there two days a week and at another clinic for two days a week.

“I’ve married since my return to Australia and at the moment, I’m finding it enjoyable to work as a subcontractor,” she says. “I have freedom, no management responsibilities and can focus on my dentistry. I even taught at

“I realised my business was my first thought when I woke and my last when I went to bed. But there were so many things I wanted to do—I wanted to live my life to its full potential.”

Dr Yeganeh Akbari, former owner, Smile Creation

Melbourne Dental Clinic. I have the best of both worlds.”

Work-life balance

One of the downsides of owning a practice is that your work-life balance can be tilted too far towards work.

Dr Armando Menezes was employed as a dentist for the Royal Australian Air Force for seven years after graduation. He then worked in a variety of practices in Sydney, Perth and Alice Springs, where he met his future wife. They moved to Perth and purchased Forum Dental Centre Belmont in 1999.

“Everything ran smoothly for 15 years, then our long-time front office coordinator and dental assistant decided to move on,” says Dr Menezes. “At the same time, my wife, our practice manager, finished her Bachelor of Health Science degree and decided to get a job in her field of speciality. It was time for me to step back from the day-to-day running of the business.”

Dr Menezes sold the practice in 2016 and agreed to stay on as a general dentist. He is still there today.

“The main advantage for me was relinquishing the stress of staff



Being a subcontractor means Dr Yeganeh Akbari can focus mainly on her dentistry.

management,” he says. “I haven’t cut back my hours; I just wanted release from the obligations of owning a business. I enjoy my work and the relationships I’ve built with my patients.”

He says it also felt a little strange handing over the reins to the new owners, Drs Rooshab and Rakhee Malde. “They instituted a lot of

technological improvements I have found useful in my work,” says Dr Menezes. “All the changes have been positive and I enjoy working with enthusiastic younger colleagues.”

While not ready to retire, Dr Menezes spends his additional spare time doing the things he enjoys, such as fishing and gardening. “When you own a dental practice, it’s difficult to have a healthy work-life balance. You’re constantly worried about all aspects of the business. Now when I finish work, I go home and have no business worries or obligations on my mind.”

Selling your business and continuing to work as a dentist is the perfect solution for some professionals. There are pros—less stress, more freedom, less responsibility—while cons include giving up control, losing touch with patients and a lower income. While it’s a gentle way to move into retirement, it can also be about redefining yourself and getting the all-important work-life balance right. **Bite**

