

## BUSINESS AND PLEASURE IN DENTISTRY

The Portuguese words “Ócio” and “Negócio” have common roots.



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**T**he word “Ócio” comes from the Latin “otium”, which refers to free time, leisure, rest.

Over time, this idea of free time evolved into the modern concept of leisure.

The word “negócio” comes from the term “negotium”, which is a combination of “nec” (not) and “otium” (leisure). So, originally, “negotium” meant something other than leisure, i.e. an occupation, activity or enterprise.

We’re not going to go into detail today about the importance of leisure, and in particular Being, to the detriment of Doing, particularly in today’s societies: for some reason we’re Human Beings and not Human Doings...

What I wanted to emphasize is the importance of valuing the concept of Business, because it has a very respectable origin.

We often hear people say that dentistry is not a business.

It seems to me that, in fact, what they’re trying to convey is that it’s not a business like any other.

In Portugal, for example, the law states that the performance of a dental medical act corresponds to a pecuniary consideration from the recipient of the services, without prejudice to the legislation applicable to voluntary work

and social action. This recognises the obvious, which is that dentistry is not only a health activity but also an economic activity.

So what is the business in dentistry?

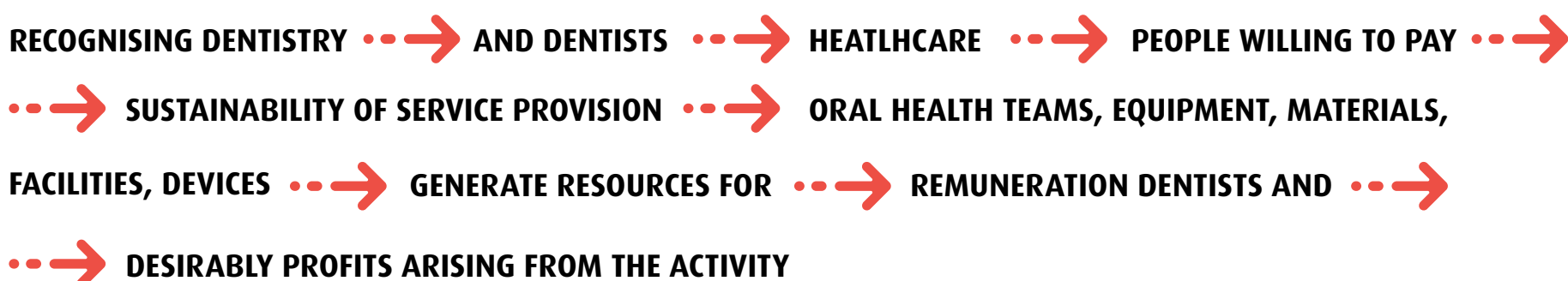
Basically, it’s about solving people’s problems within the scope of the European Union Directives, i.e. the study, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of anomalies of the teeth, mouth, jaws and attached structures.

A business that is different from many others in that it is subject to its own framework in terms of regulations, standards and, above all, ethics, guaranteeing patient safety, emphasizing the direct doctor-patient relationship and the provision of care in the context of the highest technical and scientific standards. The huge asymmetry of information between dentists and service recipients further emphasizes this statement.

It’s a business that starts from the premise that clients, society in general, recognize the provision of care by dentists as useful and value-creating and thus capable of getting consumers, patients, some of whom pay directly out of pocket or indirectly through taxes or contributions for that care.



This payment is mostly made in Portugal directly, out of pocket, in the liberal and private practice of the profession, the viability of which is based on the following equation:



The problem is that, in Portugal, more than 60 per cent of the population is unable to afford dental care where it is available, essentially in the private sector. On the other hand, dentists' salaries are very low. And dental organizations have rarely shown sufficient capacity to generate profits.

As a result, the essential aspect of the profession's sustainability has been jeopardized, leading to the natural emigration of qualified dentists, particularly younger ones, to other countries in the European Economic Area and even to third countries; and also to the loss of adequate dental care for very large sectors of the population living in Portugal.

The causes of this situation are deep-rooted but are based above all on the country's economic development model, which has been unable to generate sufficient economic growth and wealth to enable the middle classes to afford dental care. The lower classes are also unable to access even basic oral health care, given the low level of public funding for dentistry.

Are dentists in Portugal destined to emigrate or work to keep warm? In idle mode?

I don't think that's acceptable.

If adequate, verifiable, and tangible remuneration is essentially not forthcoming, and a substantial part of the population does not have access to dentistry, then alarm bells should ring and the organizational, accessibility and business model of Portuguese dentistry should be reformulated. If we prefer, the business model should be changed, promoting in Portugal, as in other European countries, universal access to dentistry through public funding under an agreement with the liberal private practice of the profession. The direct payment model and public services are leaving citizens and dentists behind.

In conclusion, and going back to the roots of the word, dentistry is fundamentally a business, in the sense that it is not basically available on a leisure, voluntary or pro bono basis.

It's not a business like any other, but a health and economic activity framed by strong ethical values and moral standards. A health and economic activity that citizens recognise as being of great value and usefulness, which solves problems and prevents many others. However, for this to

happen, dentistry needs to be economically sustainable and generate profit, which should be geared first and foremost towards rewarding dentists, the main protagonists of the activity.

That's also why, when we say that dentistry is not a business, we must be careful not to sound as if we are putting dentists' natural economic interest in the profession on a lower plane. Dentistry is practiced by highly qualified professionals, not by privileged idlers looking to kill time...■



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