

SASA Wellness – My Story : Dr Dirk van Zijl

I am 46 years old, and in full time private practice. I do just over 1300 Anaesthetics myself a year, and am CEO of an associate practice that has 21 members.

My wife is a specialist geriatrician in private practice and she work till 14h30 every day, and then chases after my two daughters who are 14 and 12.

We have four dogs at home (one adopted, two are rescues), my daughter keeps a 2 meter long 6 year old albino corn snake, and we have some ring neck doves in an outside aviary.

Our house often resembles a railway station with children and family staying over.

1. How do you stay healthy?

I try and keep every Friday morning off for a cycle and some admin meetings, and usually get home early enough on a Monday or a Thursday to fit in a short cycle or a run before dinner. Depending on children's sporting and social commitments on a Saturday I squeeze in a 5km park run or a cycle before watching hockey, or go for a longer cycle afterwards. Sundays usually involve a family activity which could be anything from tennis, to hockey, to a walk up the mountain, trail run or another mountain bike ride. According to STRAVA I average 3 cycles (total 6-7 hours with 2500m of climbing) and one run (5km time trial) per week. I also do a circuit around the garden that includes pull ups, sit ups and pull ups, and I am busy building some more core strength exercises into my weekly program. What you eat is more important than what you do though, and I have no sugar in tea or coffee and try hard to stay away from all processed foods and sugar, but my weaknesses are dark chocolate, a good whisky, Shiraz & Pinot Noir.

2. What motivates you?

The alarm goes off at 05h40 every day at our house, and everyone is out the house by 07h00 latest. I really do look forward to doing my job each and every day. I love giving anaesthetics, I look forward to the patient interactions, I love the challenge of the job, and I am very blessed to be working with some amazing people. People that I would happily hang out with outside of work (and regularly do), so the fact that we happen to be working together is just a real bonus. The motivation is to make each and every anaesthetic the best anaesthetic you have ever done, and having the satisfaction to know that you have done just that.

3. How do you de-stress?

I exercise a lot. I am very dependent on the natural endorphins released by proper exercise. I used to only run (marathon and trail running), but I took up mountain biking almost three years ago after an ankle injury and have really enjoyed the fact that you still get the kicks, but you have more fun, and the recovery time is much quicker. It is also more social, and I often ride with surgeons I work with, work colleagues and friends. The coffee or beer at the end of the ride is also part of the experience.

Music is also an important escape for me, and depending on the day I will listen to anything from Mozart to Linkin Park on the way home. I think that when you walk through the door into your home, you have to have yourself sorted. If not, then drive around the block and listen to another song.

4. How do you prevent burnout?

Live within your means: I have seen it all too often in the medical industry where people are working because they HAVE to work. Divorce and the death/severe illness of a partner will leave you at a financial disadvantage, but a lot of the financial woes are brought about by "keeping up with the Jones's". My household and daily living expenses are way less than 20% of my average monthly earnings (after VAT and income tax), so that takes a huge amount of pressure off me financially. I don't have a trust fund or an inheritance to rely on, and everything I have is saved or invested myself, but knowing that I can afford to retire from age 58 onwards does remove a huge stress.

Take a break: Since entering private practice in 2006, I have taken at least 8 weeks off a year, attending one overseas congress, and the local SASA congress, leaving a large chunk available for holidays with the family. We try and go to game reserves and places that are in the wilderness with no cell phone reception. Our family's passion is the fauna and flora of Southern Africa and we have managed to take the children to just about every game reserve

in the country. Our main holiday is the three week July holiday where we regularly do over 6,000km round trips from Cape Town to Namibia, Kruger, Natal, Eastern Cape, etc and next year we are driving to the Okavango delta. Photography and birdwatching are passions shared by the whole family which makes the travelling bearable, and the adventures pleasing for everyone. We then spend weeks processing the photos and making books. I try and take two weeks off in every three month cycle, as I find this keeps the energy levels up and enthusiasm for the work high. Having the next holiday planned when you have finished the current one also helps.

NB: Without living within your means, you won't have the funds or the appetite to take so much leave, because as a self-employed person, when I am on leave I earn nothing.

5. **How do you manage your time effectively?**

You have to be organised and stick to a plan. I stick to a circadian rhythm, which means that even on weekends I get up early. This keeps the sleep pattern regular. My wife and I retire to the study when the kids go to bed at 20h30, and we work till about 23h00 each week night, and often on Sunday evenings. I work in concentrated Epoch's or bursts where I do multiple things at once. Preparing lists and notes for the next day, phoning patients, scanning through billing information, reading through emails, etc. I generally don't reply to emails during the day, but read them when I can, and always just before a long commute or cycle. Then in the car or whilst exercising I think about what I am going to say in response, so that when I focus on replying the emails later on that day I type the answer that is already in my head. My first task is to clear my inbox each night and reply to all emails, so nothing is left for the next day. Then I do the admin stuff like billing, banking, etc.

Get a speaker phone – you can do a lot of filing whilst talking to someone on the phone . . .

6. **How do you recover after a disappointment/setback?**

I talk to my wife, and then I talk to someone else who understands my situation, and then I talk to another person who understands my situation. We have a very supportive group practice where we meet once a month for a journal club, and afterwards we discuss problem cases, bad outcomes, near misses, etc. This is where you learn from the experiences of others, and talking about the problem or setback makes me feel better. A very long cycle or a walk in the mountain also helps find perspective.

7. **What advice would you give to your 18 year old self?**

Look after your body – you only have one, and it has to last a very long time.

8. **What advice would you give to a medical student wanting to pursue a career in Anaesthesia?**

Anaesthesia has to be your passion if you want to succeed. You will master your skill faster than the surgeons, and after that there will be little innovation or new techniques to learn so you will have to be content that what you are doing is meaningful enough to please you and give you fulfilment in your life. Surgeons take far longer to gain their mastery and their levels of innovation far outstrip Anaesthesia. Anaesthesia is incredibly rewarding, but in many settings you will be the only one recognizing your own skills and worth, as for the most part it will be lost on the company you keep.

9. **How do you turn a bad mood into a good mood?**

You need to recognise that you are in a bad mood first! This does require a certain amount of emotional intelligence, and the strength of character to put whatever caused the bad mood to one side, and simply move on and focus on what is good and positive in the world, because the next person you meet has no idea what mood you were in five minutes ago.

