

With art and soul



Beauty, excellence and a Samurai legend: prestige handpiece manufacturers NSK have woven more than world-class engineering into their business.

By Jade Richardson

It's the cherry blossoms he wants me to think of, above all the other things.

"The cherry blossoms?"

I am chatting to Roger Shalfoon about world-leading technology, rotary genius and its applications, the 80-year-old family dynasty at NSK, a world leader in dental and surgical instrument manufacture, and he is very clear about it ... you won't really appreciate any of this unless you understand the cherry blossom. When he sends me images to help with my research he does not send titanium handpieces and ultrasonic scalers, he sends the most beautiful images of NSK's head office, exploding with blossoms.

He doesn't want to talk sales. He doesn't even point out to me merits of the NSK business (which grew on already solid foundations by 11% in 2010), or the usual quotes about why his brand outclasses or out-sells its rivals.

When I press him to discuss the business he laughs and says this: "I run the company in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific – those are three of the 140 countries NSK sells to – and it's the most satisfying involvement I've ever had in my professional life!"

NSK, since its beginnings in Japan in 1930, has been dedicated to producing precision, high performance, rotary cutting technology and in those 81 years has perfected the craft and the science to the point where the engineering has become an art. NSK's prestige Ti-Max titanium range, "the Rolls Royce in rotary cutting," says Roger, is accurate to less than a micron and delivers solid titanium handpieces that may well be the most comfortable and dynamic in the world.

"One of the key words for us is precision," he says. "Think small. Think smaller again ... now let's start talking really small, so small in fact that you can hardly even imagine it. That's the level of precision, that's the accuracy and the detail we're working at."

NSK's newest offer to market is the Pico, an ultra mini head handpiece, "so small you can't believe it!" Maybe this is their finest engineering yet?

"Without doubt, the dental profession relies on precise, high performance, reliable rotation. NSK accepts this reliance as their responsibility to build these critical, yet invisible characteristics into each of their products," says Roger.

The Pico was launched in March 2011 at the IDS Expo in Germany, with fascinating applications for children, difficult access and endodontic work when under microscope.

Getting deeper into what motivates Roger and drives the business, another keyword at NSK could well be magic! "We can deliver rotation from 1rpm all the way through to 450,000rpm – that's about 7,500 revolutions per second!" he says. "Blink and we've made technology that will have spun around 7,500 times. Now that, in anybody's language, is incredible!"

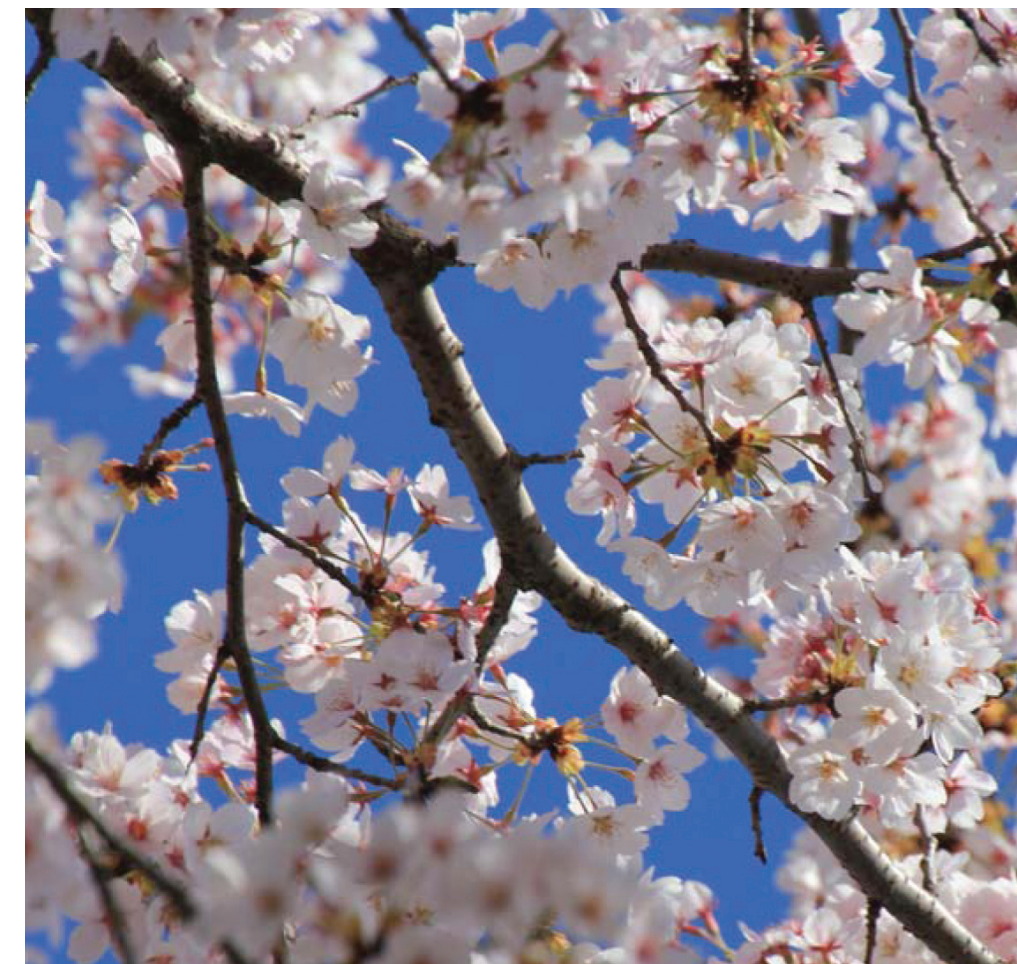
"So what really is the point of this kind of excellence?" I wonder. Why make Ferraris instead of Hyundais?

"Yes," agrees Roger, "Exactly," he says. "Let's not talk sales, it's so much more interesting than that."

NSK has watched, reacted and provided the tools to support an 80-year transition in dental skill, technology, materials and application that is nothing short of mind-boggling. "What dentists can offer people these days in pain relief alone is incredible, but in the ability to provide completely artificial prosthesis that feel natural, that look natural, that improve their lifestyles and their wellbeing and their confidence – that's a magic that is very easy to overlook.

"I would suggest that dentistry is the most advanced of all the medical fields offering prosthesis. Think about it: is there any other field in which practitioners can achieve such immediate, perfect, life-enhancing work? What dentists can offer is really quite extra-ordinary – each one is a magician in their own right."

Which makes NSK a specialist in wand-making! "What's possible these days is really only limited by how curious a dentist is about what he or she is capable of. If you want rotation equipment that works with you, that is capable of extremely powerful results, NSK is the brand you're going to be using."



Which is where the cherry blossoms come in. In Japanese culture art, tradition, legend and perfection are important themes in life and business. Without doubt hanami (cherry blossom viewing) is one of the most popular customs, dating back to the Heian period (794–1191) when aristocrats at court held parties to enjoy the fleeting grace and beauty of sakura (cherry blossoms). As the custom and its wisdom ripened, cherry blossom became a symbol of the legendary Japanese warrior class, the Samurai,

symbolizing the elegance and beauty of life, and the grace with which Samurai die for their cause.

So closely associated were Samurai and cherry blossom that during the kamakura period a Samurai heading into battle would stop his march if his path was scattered with cherry petals. He considered it desecration to trample on the blossoms.

The message of the cherry blossom, without doubt the deepest symbol in Japanese life, is that while beauty and life are fleeting, they are also self-renewing in the cycle of life. Cherry blossom reminds the nation to value beauty and perfection for their own sake, to live life in the moment, and to live well.

At the NSK factory and headquarters in Kanuma, Japan, the cherry blossoms will have fallen by the time you read this. Each year though, the grounds of the site are a spectacle in blossoms, a magical paradise of sweet-fragranced, delicate blossoms that emerge out of the tough Japanese winter and symbolize hope, beauty, the transience of life. Roger tells me the location was chosen specifically for this reason by NSK founder Keiichi Nakanishi so that NSK, so heavily dedicated to precision and excellence, would be seated forever also in respect to the more fleeting joys and wonders of life in this world. ♦