

‘The *important* thing is to *move with the times*’

By Kate A. Quinlan¹



As a teenager **Sharon Grant** dreamt of fighting fires but these days she is the only dental therapist in the UK to hold a master's degree in Dental and Maxillofacial Radiology.

Somewhere among the brightly-lit streets of Blackpool with the scent of candy floss in the air and the ever-present blare of amusement arcades, Sharon Grant works as a dental therapist by day and a radiography lecturer by night.

Sharon, who is over 30, originally became a dental nurse by chance when she left school, while waiting for the next available recruitment to the fire service.

'I went to the job centre and applied for every job on the rack (this was the age of the little cards with job details on). Dental nurse was the one I got. And so it began.'

Dental nursing

Sharon spent six years in general dental practice where she did her initial dental nursing qualification, then a further six years in what was then the community dental service, where she picked up a clutch of post-qualification certificates.

'I was one of the few dental nurses who attained the NEBDN Certificate in General Anaesthetic Nursing. This qualification didn't run for very long. As a result I was asked by the dental nurse tutor at my local college to go in and do a session on it. I enjoyed it and decided teaching was something I would like to pursue.'

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Shortly afterwards Sharon started her Certificate of Education and managed to secure teaching hours at another college, which turned into a permanent job.

‘I was just lucky I guess: right place, right time. Assessor and Internal Verifier qualifications came about when the NVQ for dental nurses came into being shortly afterwards.’

Sharon went down to part time hours dental nursing in general practice, and worked part time teaching.

Accidental training

In 2004, SMG Training was born, a training company providing qualifications, courses and continuing professional development (CPD) for the dental team, owned and operated by Sharon.

‘SMG came about by accident!’ says Sharon. ‘It was never a conscious decision at all. The college I worked at decided to stop providing the NEBDN National Certificate (as it was) when the NVQ became more established but many dental practices preferred the Nat Cert and wanted to continue training their nurses that way. So, I provided it independently and things just rolled from there.’

2014 marks ten years since SMG’s first National Certificate course. Sharon considers

running the company to be more of a hobby than a job but says: ‘The important thing is to move with the times. I was ready for CPD when General Dental Council registration came in. I am now moving all my courses online because that is what people want’.

SMG Training no longer offer the NEBDN qualification for General Dental Council (GDC) registration, instead focusing on providing post-registration qualifications such as the Certificates in Dental Radiography, Dental Sedation Nursing, Oral Health Education (Fluoride Application and Plaque Indices) and Special Care Dental Nursing, in addition to a selection of CPD and Scope of Practice courses. Sharon employs four tutors, all dental nurses, and all with specific areas of expertise.

Dental therapy

Sharon completed a BSc in Oral Health Science in Manchester in 2007, adding the role of dental therapist to her CV.

‘I enjoyed dental nursing a lot,’ says Sharon, ‘but I love to learn and was driven to do an undergraduate degree of some sort. This would then give me the potential to do further study such as an MSc or PhD. I consider myself to be an eternal student.’

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Being a dental therapist wasn't Sharon's aim, which she knows might irk some dental nurses who read this and are keen to become therapists. At the time, however, she wanted to do a degree in the subject area of dentistry and it seemed like dental therapy was the only way forward.

Sharon had no difficulties securing a place on the Oral Health Science degree. 'It was in the early days of the degree course and there wasn't as much competition as there is today.'

Commuting to Manchester from Blackpool every day was a challenge, 'but doable', and Sharon sailed through the degree and graduated with honours, 'so it was all worth it'.

Mastering radiology

Sharon's quest for knowledge didn't end with her undergraduate degree:

'Deciding to undertake an MSc in Dental and Maxillofacial Radiology was a no-brainer. I love radiation/radiography and everything about it so it was always going to be in this subject. No-one could quite believe that I wanted to do it just for my own personal gain and not for a better job or a wad of cash!'

Sharon had to apply to the course twice before she was accepted as she wasn't a dentist. The university (King's College in London) couldn't quite comprehend why a dental therapist would want to do the course.

'Eventually, with a pair of carefully chosen referees, I was accepted on to the programme,' says Sharon.

Intrepid Sharon describes the master's course as 'amazing', being taught by the best dental radiologists in the country.

'Everyone was so knowledgeable, it was an honour. Now that it is over I really miss it.'

The course was provided through distance learning with a three-week residential period in London each year.

Sharon had no problem finding the motivation to study through distance learning as she enjoys the subject so much.

'The residential was great. Of the students only three were from the UK. It is an international programme so I met people from all over the world and indeed, have now got a very good friend in Canada who I went to visit late last year. In addition, I

cannot speak highly enough of King's College, London. A fantastic place to study in all respects.'

Sharon now loves the fact that she has a wealth of knowledge on dental radiology so that when she speaks on the subject and students need more information, she can provide it for them 'more or less immediately'.

A supportive practice

Sharon considers herself lucky to have a supportive husband when it comes to her many career endeavours: 'God love him, my husband never really gets a choice!' Luckily, the colleagues at her dental practice were also really supportive when she was studying for her master's degree, helping Sharon to find cases for her projects.

'I am self-employed so taking time off for the residentials wasn't an issue. Some of the dentists did poke fun at me for carrying textbooks around though and some thought my chosen subject was bonkers! I think they were all secretly jealous.'

Sharon hopes that she might be an inspiration to some of the dental nurses at her practice, as she also started off as a dental nurse, and her career progression shows what can be achieved. She would like to see more dental nurses with degrees.

Sharon is now Radiation Protection Supervisor at her practice. 'It is a busy role as there are nine surgeries and a total of 20 staff members who can take radiographs to keep an eye on.'

Sharon works two to three days in practice a week and around one day a month in the classroom teaching the NEBDN Certificate in Dental Radiography or a CPD course in dental radiation for various deaneries. She is also involved in a couple of foundation training programmes, teaching her favourite subject of course, radiography.

'On top of this I have my online students and online tutors to support,' says Sharon. 'One of the best things about online training is the wide geographical area we can cover and the nurses that we speak to. There are some fantastically dedicated dental nurses out there. It is a privilege to work with them.'



Outside dentistry

Beyond her busy in-surgery and teaching schedule, Sharon devotes one day a week to canines - the furry variety.

'I have three golden retrievers so we like to get out on a good walk or to a flyball competition. Most of the time is spent walking up big hills through loads of mud with them. Two of my dogs also compete in flyball [a sport involving dogs racing against each other over a line of hurdles] so I am off most weekends in the summer doing that.'

Sharon is currently investigating the possibilities for her next degree but has not yet made her mind up. In the meantime she says:

'Life is pretty much dogs, dentistry and X-rays. I try not to confuse the three!'

If you are interested in undertaking a course with SMG Training, some of which can be studied online, visit www.smgtraining.co.uk or call 07967 531185.

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