Dental school is not for the *faint hearted!*

By Kate Quinlan¹

Not content with being a dental nurse then a dental hygienist and therapist, **Carolyn Renton** is now a fully-fledged undergraduate dental student.

Dental nursing

Dental nursing was my first job when I was 17. I worked as a dental nurse in Nottingham, Kent and London and completed every post-qualification course available: dental radiography, dental sedation, oral health education, orthodontics and implantology. When I had gone as far as I could, I decided to further develop my career. I realised that I had an incessant thirst to learn and I was fortunate enough to be offered a place to study dental hygiene and therapy by three institutions on my first application attempt.

Hygiene and therapy

Graduating with a Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Therapy from Sheffield in 2006 took me to the next level in dentistry. Finally I was working directly, with my own list of patients and my own room. I loved that career progression.

I worked for two years as a dental hygienist and therapist before the first degree arose for dental care professionals (DCPs): the BSc (Hons) Primary Dental Care at the University of Kent. I undertook two years of the three-year course before I decided it wasn't for me as there was no concentration on the clinical aspects of dentistry, where ultimately my heart lies. The course was good and I learnt many academic developmental skills that I am still using every day. It was classed as a full-time degree, but attendance was for three full days over the weekend for every module. I was able to carry on working almost full-time but there was a lot self-study to be done during my down time.

Although this degree is no longer available, it was open to all DCPs and the cohort I was in (the first ever) had a full mix of dental hygienists, dental nurses and me, a dental hygienist and therapist.

First class degree

In 2011 a BSc (Hons) in Dental Studies was developed at the University of Central Lancashire that was tailored to all DCPs but had specific modules designed for dental therapists. I jumped to enrol on that course as it covered advanced periodontology and restorative aspects of dentistry and was much more practical and hands-on. This course demanded alternate weekend attendance so I was able to carry on working full-time. Initially for the restorative module we were all dental therapists, but as I progressed to the periodontology modules dental hygienists participated too. I enjoyed the course and I was lucky enough to be awarded

the whole five years plus a year of Foundation training at the end. So it is definitely not for the faint hearted!

I applied to a couple of universities but I was only offered an interview at Leeds Dental Institute. Luckily enough I got accepted on my first attempt. When I was offered an unconditional place I was flabbergasted

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with a first class honours degree in 2013.

My courses did not have an impact on my working career or my financial bearing, as my clinical remit has not changed. It has, however, helped me to grow and develop academically, has stimulated me mentally, and satiated my thirst for knowledge.

Dental school

I decided to apply for dentistry in summer 2012. It had always been a dream of mine, but one I thought was out of my grasp. Becoming a dentist takes a lot of commitment and financial hardship so it was a decision that needed a lot of thought and complete support, which fortunately my husband is willing to give. The course costs £9,000 a year and despite my previous qualifications I have had to start from the beginning and will have to complete

and overwhelmed. The interview process is tough as you have to rotate around numerous interview stations undertaking different tasks. The selection process is down to performance numbers as opposed to personal feelings during an oral interview, so it was extremely gruelling.

Being a fresher

I am just finishing the first academic year. It is much tougher than I expected and much more in-depth than anything I have learnt before. However, I have a passion for learning and I am enjoying the challenge.

There are a couple of other students with some dentistry background, but none as old (!) or as experienced as me. In some aspects of the course I think I will have an advantage, especially when it comes to patient communication and dealing with difficult

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situations. I may also have an advantage with some clinical work, but as I mentioned, dentistry is much more scientific and coming fresh from having top mark A-levels definitely stands the other dental students in good stead.

Blessed

I am fortunate to have an absolutely amazing husband, who is a pilot in the RAF. My husband supports me emotionally, psychologically and financially. Without him none of this would be possible. I have been truly blessed with a gift from heaven.

I'll graduate in 2018. In the meantime my husband and I plan to buy our own practice, as soon as the right one becomes available. I intend to work in the practice part-time providing dental therapy and hygiene until I complete dental school, then work in the practice full-time and my husband will manage it.

My family are never surprised when I inform them of my next planned educational pathway;

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they've almost come to expect it. They're always enthusiastic and proud which gives me all the energy to keep on going.

During my hygiene and therapy studies I also became qualified in aerobics, step, indoor cycling, studio resistance and dance-style aerobics. I recently joined the gym and would like to get back into regular exercise.

I also love cooking and enjoy hosting dinner parties for family and friends.

Careers and commitment

I think now is an excellent time for dental nurses to apply for dental hygiene and therapy. With direct access and the changes with the NHS contract, hygienists and therapists are going to be very popular and while most universities are still providing hygiene and therapy courses as a diploma instead of a degree, there are no student fees, and bursaries plus grants are available.

Becoming a dentist is not only competitive, but very expensive and very lengthy. It takes a lot of discipline and commitment, but if you think you have got what it takes, why not give it a go too?!

bdjteam201447