

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DENTAL SUPPORT WORKER

By **Fiona Ellwood**

The Society of British Dental Nurses continues to raise awareness of Dental Support Workers¹ and questions why these individuals are not following a training pathway that would enhance the current dental nursing workforce.

Prior to mandatory registration, City and Guilds provided a level 2 in dental nursing, which was such a vital step for those entering into the field of dentistry either straight from school or as a second career. Sadly, it did not meet the requirement to enable individuals to work chairside or become registrants – perhaps just simply poor timing. Still, it allowed individuals and the team to work together and make informed decisions for the workplace.

As we battle to attract people into the profession,² surely we need to think differently, but is the Dental Support Worker role muddying the waters here? We are keen to understand what their role is, particularly as this role is now apparent in both England and Scotland³ and because it appears to be focused on dental nursing skills. More than this we also hope to explore where and how these support workers are being employed and what it is that allows them to undertake all of the activities assigned to them, without being on a training pathway for dental nurses.

The dental nurse student

Student dental nurses are generally employed and undertake all dental nursing primary duties under the supervision of a dentist and other members of the team who are trained to supervise and support the students.⁴ Working alongside a registered and knowledgeable dental nurse is so important and it has the potential to provide the student with a greater chance of being successful in their qualification and a confident practitioner.

Dental nurse students must be either ‘in training’ and that means in training in the workplace and waiting to begin training on an approved General Dental Council (GDC) training course or someone undertaking an approved dental nurse training course, who is employed. Those in training must be supervised and mentored throughout their training. The level of



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support and supervision provision depends on their skill sets and the progression of the individual. The student should be included in their training pathway design and the decisions that are made.

Commonly, the approved dental nursing courses tend to be set at level 3 or are equivalent to a level 3 qualification, although there are a number of higher level dental nursing courses that are becoming more popular. Most courses take 12–24 months to complete and are framed as work-based learning vocational courses. On completion, students can apply to become registrants of the GDC.

When you compare the role of the student dental nurse with the dental support worker in Table 1, and the role of the health care support worker in Scotland in Box 1, you can see why the Society is concerned. We feel it is important to

highlight that the Society seeks to gain reassurance that these individuals will be well trained and have clarity of their role and responsibilities, as well as their limitations – this is of equal importance. It is also important that there is an obvious difference for patients so that they can be confident that the dental nurse supporting them is a registered dental professional or a dental nurse student in training, whilst the support worker supports the professional team.

The Society is questioning the use of the title, given that the term ‘dental’ must be approved for use by the GDC, and believes that the scope of their work and the support to clinicians could be misleading and confusing for patients. There is also the potential for mission creep on the one hand and the risk of these roles being abused on the other. Patient safety has to

Table 1 The role of student dental nurse compared to the role of dental support worker

Student Dental Nurse	Dental Support Worker
Meet and greet patients and reassure nervous patients	Meet and greet patients and reassure people who are nervous to make appointments
Assist and support administrative and reception duties	Provide advice about dental care
Provide information and advice about dental care	Give advice preventing tooth decay
Provide evidence-based oral health messages	Show adults and children how to brush teeth effectively
Keep and maintain dental records, including charting and indices	Give advice on fluoride treatment
Mix materials for dental procedures, including for restorations and impressions	Keep dental records
Assist and process dental radiographs	Mix materials for dental procedures, including for fillings
Maintain high standards of infection prevention and control, including the processing and storing of instruments	Help with x-rays
Assist the clinician in dental procedures, including the passing of instruments	Sterilise instruments and equipment
Assist patients with mouth rinse.	Pass instruments to the dentist
	Help patients with mouth rinse.
	Based in clinics, community of hospital settings – typically Band 2. Entry requirements are same as a dental nurse student.

be a priority and that is associated with the safe and effective delivery of care and the maintenance of a safe working environment, with excellent infection prevention and control and clinical governance.

Support workers, assistants, and associates are certainly trending again, but unless they become part of the solution and head into traineeship with a career to aim for, we are just as likely to see a high turnover of dental support workers and feel the repercussions from the dental nurse registrants. What we must not see is dental nurse substitution; this is a backward step in our eyes. The Society is baffled as to why the investment is not forthcoming to train and support those already in the profession or who wish to train.

On a final note, the Society is also considering the impact on the professional status of the existing workforce. Registration was a long time coming and it came with a price tag and what we can be sure about is that we need to do more to encourage people to join the profession and provide opportunities for success so that they stay.

The Society has brought this to the attention of the GDC on more than one occasion. We would be delighted to receive feedback on these thoughts. Visit www.sbdn.org.uk.

References

1. NHS. Dental support worker. NHS Health Careers. Available at: <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/wider-healthcare-team/roles-wider-healthcare-team/clinical-support-staff/dental-support-worker> (accessed February 2024).
2. Ellwood F. Society of British Dental Nurses: Annual Survey. 2023.
3. NHS Scotland. Health care support worker – Dental Nursing. 2023. Available at: <https://apply.jobs.scot.nhs.uk/Job/JobDetail?JobId=153593> (accessed February 2024).
4. General Dental Council. Employing trainee dental nurses or dental technicians. Available at: <https://www.gdc-uk.org/standards-guidance/supporting-the-dental-team/employing-trainees> (accessed February 2024).

Box 1 The role of Health Care Support Worker in Scotland

Scotland Health Care Support Worker

Health Care Support Worker (HCSW) carries out direct patient care in support of and supervised directly and indirectly by a registered dental nurse (RDN).

- Competently perform the necessary aspects of care for the defined patient group
- Ensure an effective delivery of dental nursing care, in a supporting role to the registered dental nurse, is provided to patients and that an acceptable standard is maintained
- Provide through NHS (XXX) policies, a safe environment for the treatment of patients and the protection of staff
- Participate in practice development programmes as required
- Under the supervision directly and indirectly of a registered dental nurse, provide a high-quality safe, and supportive environment to care for patients with the dental outpatient department meeting the identified physical and psycho-social needs
- The NCSW to work on occasion without direct supervision of a registered dental nurse
- Ensure effective day-to-day management of resources including supplies, equipment etc
- Responsible to the Dental Nurse Team Leader for clinical guidance
- The post holder will act within the principles of NHS (XXX) code of conduct of Professionals for HCSW
- Participate in cross departmental cover (including other Oral Health Directorate sites), when required.

