New possibilities

From fast cars to private practice and the prison service, new regulations mean every day is different for therapist Jan Pitman, reports **Christopher Sell**.

July 2002 signalled an abrupt change in the working practices of the country's dental therapists, when new legislation transformed what was once a restrictive and somewhat innocuous position within the dental team into a role that now traverses the pivotal positions of a dentist and hygienist.

For Jan Pitman, a dental therapist who has witnessed the changes first hand, it has enabled a return to the profession she loves and she is revelling in the newfound responsibility and broader workload that the changes have provided. 'It is an absolute bonus, because we are now able to work outside the community service.' These extended roles include the administering of the ID block, pulpotomies, emergency temporary replacement of crowns and take impressions.

Jan left the profession for 22 years after being unable to secure a position following a

move from her native Hampshire to Oxfordshire. 'There just were not enough places in the community,' she says. 'I have a lot of friends who were therapists that could not get work in the community service; one is now a chiropodist, and one is a teacher because they could not get jobs.' Following the recent legislation, however, dental therapists are now able to practice in all areas of the work place, including private and general dental practice, and Jan took a refresher course and returned to dental therapy.

Jan now splits her time between a number of private dental practices as well as occupying two unique roles; as the dental therapist for Aylesbury Young Offenders prison, and the on-site therapist at the BMW factory in Oxfordshire.

Jan's day commences at 8am and, depending on the treatment required, she can see up to 25 people per day, be it hygiene appoint-

day in the life!

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ments, fillings or a combination of the two. On the Tuesday, perhaps the most fascinating but professionally challenging day, Jan spends the morning at Aylesbury prison (built as a county jail in 1847, Aylesbury holds the longest sentenced and highest security category young males in the English prison system) treating boys between the ages of 15-21. 'It is a challenge because believe it or not we are seeing murderers, rapists and drug dealers. But I took a conscious decision not to know or think about what they are in for. To me, they are just boys and they are doing their punishment. If they get a little woozy, then we treat them accordingly - a bit like their Mum.'

Despite being somewhat daunted initially by the prison, Jan has become accustomed to the high security and consistent presence of guards at every turn. In fact, Jan garners a lot of satisfaction from the mornings in Aylesbury, 'They probably haven't had the best of treatment or the best of lives,' she says.

This empathetic approach advocated by the British Association of Dental Therapists (BADT) is where therapists such as Jan excel, calming stressed or anxious patients into a state of mind where treatment is once again possible. Jan recalls one prisoner was being particularly difficult and refused to have any work done; Jan pointed out she had a very good technique for giving injections before then asking, 'Did you feel that?' to which the patient replied, 'Oh I never felt that Miss.' 'No,' said Jan, 'You wouldn't.' In another case, a worker at the BMW factory worked himself into such a state of anxiety that he would always be sick prior to his treatment. After two sessions with Jan, he now returns regularly, is never sick and displays no apprehension whatsoever. 'He even came in the other day for an extraction,' says Jan.

This caring approach also extends to Jan's afternoon at the BMW factory, where attention to the patient is paramount. 'I don't care if we are in a factory situation. Our receptionist knows everybody is greeted with a smile.'

The factory is an altogether different type of challenge, with 4,500 members of staff, predominantly male. However, the patients are seemingly taking on board Jan's hygiene advice and, after 10 months at the factory, some of the workers are returning for the second or third time. It is this aspect of the job that gives Jan the most satisfaction and is perhaps the overriding reason Jan left her

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career as a sales director. 'If you were to ask me what keeps me going, bearing in mind I have been out for 22 years, I get a buzz because every day is different, every patient and every mouth different. You don't have time to be bored because it is a constant challenge. And it is really satisfying when someone who has had a bad experience or is terrified says 'that wasn't so bad' and they will see you in six months and that is a real buzz, because it means you have done your job well.'

Jan's day-to-day role is vital in the dental context. 'A very specialised cog in a wheel that makes it turn,' describes Jan. The ability to carry out varying treatment plans often within tight time frames, and to do so at differing locations throughout the week with

patients in various states of stress or anxiety is laudable, not least as it enables the dentist to focus on more complex work, which is clearly going to benefit the patient.

Despite the relatively low profile of the therapist and occasional dissension over the relative ambiguity of the title, Jan's work is highly influential in a practice and is seemingly the way forward for the dental practice; dentists who in the past were perhaps unsure of how to treat therapists are beginning to realise that they can play a key part in any surgery or practice.

As colleague Alison Lockyer states, '...in reality the patients don't care about titles, they vote her a success because she's on their wavelength, gets the job done and doesn't hurt.'

There are currently 450 therapists on the roll of the GDC and an estimated 1450 have been trained since New Cross opened its doors in 1960. About 60 are trained each year. The New Cross school was closed in 1983 but the London Hospital School shortly afterwards became the first to provide integrated therapy and hygiene training.

Therapy training lasts 27 months, full time; or a three-year full time degree; or two years part-time for qualified dental hygienists (two days per week). Half of the training is devoted to clinical practice. More details can be obtained from the GDC's website, www.gdc-uk.org and the BADT website, www.badt.org.uk