:interview

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IN A WOMAN'S WORLD

It's a man's world, or so the saying goes, but when it comes to dental nursing men are in the minority... at least for now, reports **Naomi Scott**.

How did you get involved in dental nursing?

'I knew people who worked at the hospital in general nursing and I knew that the NHS would be a good organisation to work for', says Tommy, a qualified dental nurse at Liverpool University Dental Hospital. 'I knew it was a stable organisation and that there is a future with possibilities of post-qualification courses and a career. I knew that you don't get guaranteed a job at the end of the course but you do get a career'. Tommy has been a dental nurse for two years now and definitely feels that he made the right decision. Tommy's colleague Tony saw an advertisement in the local newspaper and hasn't looked back since. 'I've been here for four years now and it's good work, I've worked in factories and building sites before but the money here is regular. I had never thought of dental nursing as an option before, but I do enjoy it.'

In Cardiff, friends and family provide a helping hand; 'I was doing a BTEC in science and I had to do some work experience, so I went to work at my Mum's friend's dental practice for a week. I enjoyed it, but when I finished my BTEC I went to stack shelves in a local supermarket. While I was there my Mum's friend came up to me and offered me a job.'

Oliver has been working in general practice for a year while doing a part time course at Cardiff dental school. 'I would not have thought of dental nursing as a career option if the dentist hadn't offered me the job. I had spent a lot of time going backwards and forwards to career centres and job centres after my BTEC, but dental nursing never came up as an option, only mechanical and vocational training courses like electricians and plumbing. Maybe it was because I was not a girl? It's difficult to say.'

Nathan (pictured left) is also at the Cardiff University Dental Hospital and is expecting to complete his NVQ in November. After finishing his BTEC in science, Nathan was in a similar situation to Oliver until a visit to a relative introduced him to the world of dentistry. 'My aunt is a forces dental nurse and I went with her to work one day to see what it was like. By the third day, the dentist said I should pursue it as a career.' After that Nathan went back to his sales job, but the job seemed pointless after helping at the dental practice, so he went to the careers office to ask them how to go about getting into dental nursing. The careers office set Nathan up with a training placement in general practice, but before long a friend noticed that they were recruiting

There are probably more than 30,000 dental nurses out there, and if you're reading this you are quite likely to be one of them.

And as the statistics go, you are more than 99% likely to be a woman, unless you are a forces dental nurse. However, men are discovering dental nursing as a profession, and although they are not quite there in their droves yet, many think it is only a matter of time.

What's it like being a man in a woman's world? **Vital** asks four male dental nurses to share their experiences.

:interview

at the hospital, so Nathan applied and loves it there 'it is amazing; it is very modern and highly computerised.'

How do people react to you as a male dental nurse?

There seems to be a mixed reaction from the public when they come to meet the rare species of the male dental nurse. Nathan has found that 'the older generations don't like male dental nurses, but the younger generation are more understanding of equal opportunities. Sometimes they think that I am the dentist, but when they find out that I am a dental nurse, they tell me I have done a good job,' says Nathan.

'People are surprised or shocked to discover that a man is a dental nurse more because they haven't thought about it as a career option for men'

Socially people are often shocked to find that a man is a dental nurse, 'the first thing they ask is "are you gay?"' says Nathan. This is quite a common reaction, but when people are made to think about it, they can't see any reason why men can't be dental nurses, particularly when the population of male general nurses is increasing. 'When they think about it, they say good on you and well done', says Nathan.

Tommy is more philosophical, commenting, 'People are surprised or shocked to discover that a man is a dental nurse more

because they haven't thought about it as a career option for men'. However when he arrived at his placement in general practice, the staff got a bit of a fright. 'They were surprised that I was a man, but I settled in straight away - I expect it's down to the people that you work with.'

Tony finds that people are more interested than shocked - interested in what it entails and what it is like. 'There were a few comments from people when I was going to apply for dental nursing but my best mate just said to go for it,' says Tony. He observed that children can be a little unnerved by a man coming to get them from the waiting room, 'especially if they are a bit frightened anyway, but once they're in the chair they're fine. Adults don't seem to mind at all, they don't really react'.

Have you come across any problems being a man in a woman's world?

'At the hospital, you are more visible and easier to identify than the female dental nurses, so you can get picked on a bit,' explains Nathan. 'Occasionally when there is something heavy that needs moving, or something that needs reaching from a higher shelf, there can be an attitude of "he's a bloke, he can do it"'.

Tony agrees. 'There is a tendency for being lumbered with the physical jobs that the women don't want to do.' Tommy sees this as more of an advantage, 'you do stand out more, and everyone gets to know you; I haven't come across many disadvantages, it should be the same whether you are male or female, the only slight problem I found was that there were no male changing facilities at some of my placements, but that would have to change as more men enter the profession'. He also points out that although it is a female-dominated profession, in a hospital you can always find a male environment if you want to, there are lads in the laboratories and there are the porters. Oliver hasn't experienced any discrimination, but has had a very positive experience, which is totally in tune with the other male dental nurses interviewed, however he made an interesting point: 'The only thing that I could mention is that all of the handouts in college refer to the dental nurse as 'she' and 'her', and they say that "the dental nurse should have her hair tied back". After that, my dentist has said that I should wear tights and some of the others at the practice have offered to wax my legs for me! It's all in good fun.'

Would you recommend it as a career ?

Nathan is really enjoying his career, and when he is qualified hopes to do a degree in dental therapy. 'I know of one man who has just qualified on this course and one that is doing it now. I think this is a good profession to get into if you are caring and glad to help patients. It is very rewarding when you see patients out of pain, or if you see a patient with implants whose dentures had been slipping and they had trouble talking and eating. They are very grateful.'

Tony (pictured top right) likes the opportunities you get to meet people, 'I really like meeting people, its always good. I sometimes do a clinic with special needs, and that is always nice. You meet all different kinds of people'.

Tommy (pictured top left) recommends dental nursing as a career, one reason being the doors that working for the NHS can open - such as general nursing and radiography. Tony agrees, 'there are lots of opportunities in the hospital: apprenticeships to be a technician or a hygienist or therapist; there are always options to move on within dentistry.'

Like Tommy, Oliver sees dental nursing as opening up opportunities to other things - 'it's a good thing to do but there is nothing wrong with a bit of ambition.' If it wasn't for dentistry he would be stacking shelves now and 'though the money could always be better, it's pretty fair and not bad really.' Oliver recommends dental nursing to his friends. 'I don't see why there shouldn't be more men in the profession.'

How can we get more men into the career?

'I think it will take a long time to change', says Nathan, 'but they need to increase the recruitment at schools and 6th form colleges and career fairs. You see lots of general nursing, but dentistry isn't there. I think people's awareness should be raised - anyone can do it, young or old'.

Tommy thinks more men are coming into the career. Tony was already working when he started his job and more male nurses are coming through. Tommy hopes more men will join the profession even if it's only for his sake as he would like the company.

Oliver has no idea at all why there aren't more male dental nurses, 'I think there could be more men in the profession if it was promoted more, there are lots of possibilities.'

Kath O'Donovan is the dental nurse manager for paediatric dentistry and for the dental school at Liverpool; she is also acting tutor dental nurse. Kath thinks more and more men are entering the profession. 'We have one male dental nurse who has been long qualified, two who have just qualified and one in training, but there have been more and more applying,' says Kath. She thinks some of this is due to the salary structure being more rewarding, as it is now possible to bring up a family on a dental nurse salary. She also feels that as more male nurses are going into general nursing, people feel it is more acceptable to start applying. People are also realising that boys are as good as girls in the chairside and in the theory.