

'I am
always
on the
go!'



Dental therapist **Melanie Joyce** has never been busier but still took time out of her hectic schedule to travel down to London and be our autumn cover star.

At 16, I went to 6th form college to study A-levels in media studies, theatre studies and Christian theology ... so who knows how I ended up in dentistry! During college my circumstances changed as I decided to move in with my boyfriend. Full time education and part time work became a struggle when I had to pay rent and bills and it was this that prompted me to leave college and look for a full time job. It was a real shame that I had to give up studying and the dream of university due to the situation I had chosen without due thought. I looked in the local paper and found several vacant trainee dental nurse posts and I thought I'd give it a go despite the fact I was terrified of the dentist as a child. I thought dental nursing sounded like a good career and after my first day as a dental nurse I was hooked. I even took a detour through town to buy Levison's textbook on my way home!

I enjoyed my first day at the dental practice and was excited about everything that I was to learn. I enjoyed being part of a team and felt like I had a purpose. I liked the fact that we were helping patients and that there were many different ways in which a dental nurse could help and be part of that care.

I started as a trainee working in an NHS practice in a team of two associates, two dental nurses (including me!) and a receptionist. I was paired with a left handed dentist who I worked with for about 18 months whilst working towards my NVQ 3 in dental nursing. I was only ever used to a left handed dentist so if I ever had to go to work with the other associate who was right handed it was very odd and I found myself in a bit of a pickle. I do think it's important to work with different clinicians as everyone works so differently. I was very enthusiastic about the job and was always full of ideas; despite this, I was told I had my head in the clouds and would never make anything of myself.

One of the associates (the right handed one!) bought out the practice and took over as principal and the receptionist left so I took the opportunity to work on reception.

At first I really enjoyed it and was very enthusiastic; I started a practice management qualification in the hope of one day becoming the manager. However, this was short lived as shortly into the course I became ill with glandular fever. I was only absent for one day as I was worried the practice would be stretched without me. After this I was very lethargic and found I didn't have the energy to keep up with the demands of such a busy job. I came in early and stayed late all with no pay, to try and catch up on outstanding work. My employer was not very supportive and used to point out the work mounting up which in the end led to me resigning, without another job to go to. This was not like me but I had really had enough and was about to give up on dentistry all together.

I tried out a couple of jobs totally unrelated to dentistry and didn't really enjoy them.

Then when browsing the jobs section of the paper once again I saw a dental nurse position and it was funny because this was a practice I had an interview at when I was first starting out. I got in contact and instantly emailed my CV over; they were impressed with my speed and organisation and asked me in for a trial day ... and the rest is history. Over time I built my confidence back up as my new employer welcomed my enthusiasm and ideas and thought I had a great future ahead. I spent four years there as a dental nurse, two years full time and two part time.

I completed my practice management qualification, did my radiography qualification, an oral health education course, an access course and an adult teaching course with teaching experience.

I worked in surgery one week and reception two weeks and was appointed health and safety manager. I worked a lot with the dental therapist and one day he turned and said to me 'you could do this, have you ever thought of training to be a dental therapist?' I was surprised somebody had that belief in me and then I started thinking maybe I *could* be a dental therapist and help make a difference.

For me, learning about oral health education was a bit of an epiphany. All of a sudden everything made sense and I realised that prevention is key. I wanted to be able to give preventative advice and treatment and help other people realise that oral diseases are preventable. I also enjoyed working with the

Melanie Joyce is a 27-year-old dental therapist from Leeds. Currently she divides her time between dental therapy roles in Leeds and a maternity cover dental hygiene role in Leicester and has recently launched her own company, Aspiradent. Melanie is a Clinical Education Advisor at Dental Nurse Network and an Opinion leader for Ivoclar Vivadent. Earlier this year she was named Dental Therapist of the Year. Melanie lives in Leeds with her partner and enjoys painting, cooking and visiting castles!

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dental therapist and thought it would be fulfilling to be able to provide treatment to patients to help improve their dental health.

I wanted to be a dental therapist rather than a dental hygienist because being a dental therapist gives you the skills to carry out a more varied scope of practice. You can take a position as a dental hygienist if you choose. The NHS pilot schemes currently taking place indicate that dental therapists will be more in demand in years to come.

I gained a place to study dental therapy at the University of Leeds on my first attempt. I had previously missed out on a place at Sheffield and I know that others in my year had been unsuccessful on their first application attempt. It is very competitive.

My employer was very supportive and wrote something for my application. He and the other staff at Newsmile Dental Care helped me gain confidence in my own abilities and since then they have always supported me and encouraged me. Without their help and support I don't know if I'd be where I am today.

While studying I worked on and off at the practice. It was mainly on a Saturday or in the holidays. Other than that I did briefly get a weekend job in a shop but I didn't last long as I didn't enjoy it and I needed to rest so I wasn't too tired for the busy weeks at university. I did most of my studying on an evening in the library as I get too distracted in other environments.

Graduating as a dental therapist in December 2010 was a brilliant feeling. I had finally made it, although I expected to be doing it all again soon as I was accepted to study dentistry (which I decided against in the end and gave up my place).

It was a real struggle to find work as a dental therapist after graduation. I found myself getting quite disheartened and down

about the job situation; so many people were competing for the same jobs and jobs in Yorkshire were few and far between, which is why I was forced to take my first job in Leicester. It was an employed job for 28 hours a week.

I saw my first patient as a dental therapist in the same practice I had been a dental nurse. The other dental therapist couldn't come in so I was asked to stand in. It was a bit scary at first but then I relaxed into it; you have to remind yourself that actually you do know what you're doing!

I particularly enjoy the educational side of being a dental therapist. There's no point in restoring someone's tooth and not addressing why it became carious in the first place; the patient will just come back again with more caries. I also enjoy carrying out restorative



work and helping to improve people's periodontal health.

I'm quite lucky in that I've always practised some therapy. I wouldn't say I carry out stainless steel crowns and pulpotomies very often but most other treatments I carry out

on a regular basis. A lot of my friends are working as hygienists.

Having previously been the North East rep for the BADN, I decided I would like to help with my new profession's association, the BADT. Initially I was



brought in to help out in the North East region. The North East rep then left so I took over and in September this year I become the Secretary. The BADT (British Association of Dental Therapists) has over 50 years of experience in assisting and supporting dental therapists and have helped to bring about huge changes for them over the years. Being a newly qualified dental therapist can be isolating and that's why being a member of a group of likeminded professionals is a great idea. I've learned a lot about the profession and met many great contacts since joining BADT.

I set up the website DentalTherapistsRock! because I started noticing on websites and in literature that dental therapists were being missed off the list. I felt left out: we exist and have done so for so many years; it's just beyond belief that people still don't know who we are. It's a lack of education and I think

if dental therapists are going to be utilised more in the future then they will need to be known by the public AND the profession.

Some of the misconceptions I have experienced about my role include 'oh, do you talk to teeth?' and 'so do you help people who are scared of the dentist?' Patients automatically assume you are a dentist or a hygienist. Some people think that the name 'therapist' doesn't really make it clear what we do.

It felt great to win Dental Therapist of the Year 2013 and a real achievement.

However, I can't help but feel that I'm not the best dental therapist in the UK. I'm sure there are some amazing therapists out there that just don't put themselves forwards for these things.

I have set up my own training company called Aspiradent Limited.

I set it up as an individual and am the sole director of the company. Originally I was going to set up a training company with three colleagues but I came to realise that having taught courses myself, having my own creative ideas and having built up contacts, I felt I had the skills and knowledge to run a training company myself.

I recognised a lack of support and specific courses for dental hygienists and dental therapists. Being a dental hygienist and therapist myself I feel I understand this group well and hope to be able to meet the needs of dental hygienists and therapists of all levels of experience.

I spent evenings, weekends and days off designing the website, thinking up the courses, sourcing tutors to work with me and connecting with collaborators.

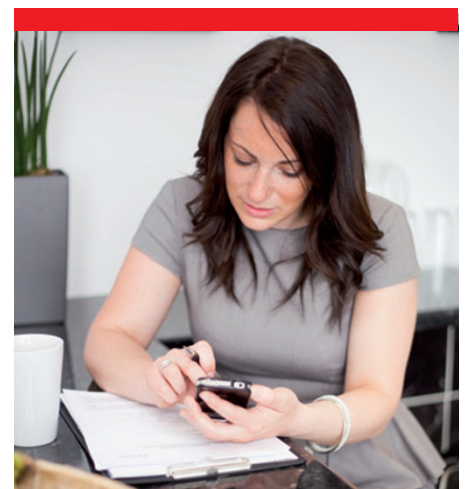
I launched Aspiradent on 1 July 2013 with a small event at the Henry Schein Showroom in Leeds. There is now a portfolio of courses open for bookings on the website www.aspiradent.com which include topics such as local anaesthetic, rubber dam, composites, impression taking, cosmetic orthodontics, periodontal screening and treatment planning, periodontal therapy and tooth

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whitening. There are also many courses in the pipeline that people can express their interest in via the website. Dental hygienists and therapists can sign up for a free monthly e-zine providing one hour of core CPD each month; there is a sign up form on the website and also on the Facebook page.

Aspiradent will be producing a booklet for newly qualified dental hygienists and dental therapists to help them through their first year in practice. It will include reflective logs and personal development plans and will act as a means to help the individual identify their development needs and pursue those needs to learn new skills or increase their knowledge.



It will also include a directory of relevant links and contacts. This booklet will be available free of charge to all newly qualified dental hygienists and therapists as Optident have kindly agreed to print it. Aspiradent will also be running courses for newly qualified dental hygienists and therapists in the future and hope to be a means of support to them along with the many other methods of support available currently.

I do think this group needs a lot of support as it can be quite a daunting time when you first qualify: trying to find a job, sort out your indemnity, finding an accountant and deciding whether to join an association and then there are many issues facing hygienists and therapists when you are in a job such as the way an employer treats you, whether you have a nurse (I usually have a nurse working with me), pay etc! It's all a little stressful and can be disheartening when it takes a while to find jobs and fill your week with work.

It's tricky to maintain a good work/life balance, particularly working in more than one location. I work hard during the week and do tend to have my weekends off, although when the courses start they are



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mainly on a Saturday so that means I can kiss goodbye to lazy Saturday mornings! I am always on the go and always have lots of ideas going round in my head - but I actually enjoy that. I love to generate ideas and work on them.

I'm not sure I ever really relax, though I do like to sleep! I love cooking when I have the time to; my favourite cuisine is probably Greek or Italian. I love cheese and rich flavours!

I would recommend dental therapy as a career to dental nurses. I think if you have the passion and drive and want to help

others then go for it. If you think it looks like a good way to make good money you are doing it for the wrong reasons and will be disappointed. It's a long road to qualification then it's another long road to get to where you want to be. It can take a while to build up work and find a practice where you fit well with the team and are happy but it is an enjoyable career and one that can be flexible and rewarding.

The three things I could not live without are my loupes, my laptop and the Internet!

Interview by Kate Maynard

Many thanks to Henry Schein for providing the photoshoot location - the Henry Schein Showroom at London's Marble Arch - and of course to Melanie for travelling on the day.

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