‘We are the **link** between the dentist and the patient’

Anglophile **Friederike Schoonhoven**, 33, originally trained for a career as a violin maker. Here she tells *Vital* how she came to be working as a dental hygienist/therapist in Banbury.

I was born and bred in Germany and attended school there until I was 19-years-old. My parents are both German, however, my mother is an English teacher who has nurtured a keen interest in the English language, the country and its culture from an early age. My first holiday to England at the age of ten got me hooked. I have now lived in England for almost 11 years, with an interruption of three years during which I moved back to Germany to train as a dental nurse.

I remember very clearly not knowing what I really wanted to do until a very late stage in my late teens. I decided that I didn't want to study at university but rather work practically doing an apprenticeship. I had been studying the violin since the age of seven, so although I would have had the option of studying music, I decided to embark on a career making violins instead. I wanted to know more about this wonderful instrument and how to make them sound the way that they do. I decided that I wanted to train as a violin maker in England. The prospect of making violins and living in the UK was very appealing.

I gained a place at West Dean College near Chichester in West Sussex where I studied for three years with the completion of an additional postgraduate year. I learned how to make the early predecessors of the violin family as well as the modern violin. This entailed carefully choosing suitable wood and making the instruments from scratch, varnishing them and playing them for the first time to adjust the sound.

I had been working as a violin maker for a couple of years when I realised that this career was not fulfilling me in terms of having contact with and working with people. Quite often I would find myself in a tiny workshop with only one other person to spend the working day with and it was sometimes not very stimulating.

I decided on a career change at which point I turned towards the medical profession. I have always had a keen interest in medicine in its wider sense; my parents like to tell stories of how I dragged a doctor's case with me everywhere I went as a child, playing make-believe games. However, teeth didn't come into the equation back then at all. I turned to dental nursing as I was convinced that it would bring me the much loved contact with different people from different backgrounds throughout the day. I trained in Germany for two-and-a-half years, gaining my dental nursing qualification.

The dental nurse course I studied in my hometown, Hagen, in Germany would normally be three years long but I was able to shorten it as I have *Abitur* (A-levels). During our training we would work in general dental practice full-time and attend school two mornings a week. After gaining my qualification in Germany, my husband and I moved back to England where I began work as a dental nurse in a very friendly orthodontic practice, Orthoworld in Banbury.

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From the outset and throughout my training as a dental nurse I had considered that I may want to further my career and become a dental hygienist. Various tutors and later on work colleagues had spurred me on to carry on studying. While I was working at Orthoworld in Banbury for a year, I applied to Birmingham School of Dental Hygiene and Therapy. I went for an interview and got accepted on the BSc course in Dental Hygiene/Therapy in Birmingham starting September 2005. I graduated in the summer of 2008 with a BSc degree.

While I was studying dental hygiene and therapy in Birmingham I enjoyed the practical work with patients the most. I found that I did not entirely enjoy the dental therapy side of things until we got to work on ‘real patients’ rather than on phantom heads! I also thrived whilst working with like-minded people who were all very ambitious and studious; we were supporting each other throughout the three years. A good mixture of the practical work as well as attending lectures made the days varied and interesting.

It was challenging for me personally to have to commute to university every single day, a

train journey that would take in excess of an hour from door to door. I found out that there is nothing more tiring than sitting on trains. I would usually use this time to revise if I was not too tired. The course was of such involvement and intensity that weekends would no longer be my own time and more often that not they were taken up with study preparation and revision. My social life hardly existed. Despite this there was always the initially faint, then later on more realistic goal in my view of what I would be able to achieve. This gave me the encouragement I needed to carry on with the course.

As graduation approached, our school director, Mrs Noble, kindly gave me the information about the South Central PCT Therapy Vocational Training (TVT) scheme.* I applied, along with a colleague from my year at university, and we were invited for an interview. Once accepted onto the TVT scheme we were able to visit the practices that were offering training. These were as far away as the Isle of Wight, Slough and Northampton. As we were both looking for work in the Banbury area, we were delighted to hear that a Banbury practice, Bloxham Dental, was offering two TVT places. We applied there as our first choice and both got in!

We started work on 1 September 2008. The VT year encompasses three days of therapy work per week at the training practice and we were lucky enough to also get employed at the same practice as hygienists, doing private hygiene appointments on the other two weekdays. On therapy days my duties might include:

- Dental restorations using all types of dental filling materials (for adults and children) under analgesia (Local Infiltration Anaesthesia and Inferior Dental Nerve Blocks)
- Deciduous extractions
- Taking radiographs
- Impressions
- NHS scale and polish
- Oral hygiene instructions (I also regularly encourage my patients to quit smoking if they are smokers)
- Fissure sealants
- Applications of fluoride varnish.

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On hygiene days I hold appointments of 15, 30 or 40 minutes for private scale and polish treatments.

When I have finished my VT year I would like to be able to find therapy work (hopefully continue working at the same practice) but it is still hard to come by. Most practices are not employing therapists as many have gone private. I would hate to lose my abilities in this area as it is what I enjoy most. However, doing both hygiene and therapy gives me the variety that I have always wanted. I would be very much interested in finding an opportunity working as a hygienist in a specialist periodontal practice as I believe that proper periodontal care can be difficult to deliver appropriately in general dental practice.

COVER STORY

I am aiming to keep on top of my CPD and the latest research that is relevant to my profession so that I can be sure I am giving my patients the best possible treatment and information.

The contact with different people from different walks of life and different cultural backgrounds is what keeps my days interesting. Every patient has a story to tell and I feel very much that it is important to get to know your patients' characters before embarking on treatment. Very anxious patients can be very challenging indeed. It is a rewarding experience to be able to put someone's mind at rest about their dental treatment and for them to leave the practice with a smile saying: 'Oh, that wasn't so bad!' I firmly believe that all treatment boils down to virtually one aspect: communication. The patient can often only judge your approach on this aspect rather than the actual dental treatment that happens in their mouths and it is therefore of the utmost importance to be able to react flexibly to different patient demands. I often find that I can learn from my patients, not just the other way round.

'The scheme is the first of its kind in England.'

Of course, it goes without saying that there are those days and appointments that just do not go to plan. Those are the ones that teach me invaluable lessons which I can draw upon. Without those I could only be half the hygienist/therapist that I am. These are the necessary experiences that make me grow, become more experienced and improve my skills.

I feel very strongly that a dental hygienist/therapist has a vital role within the dental team. By 'specialising' in dental restorations, we are able to free up time for the dentists to concentrate on their treatment specialties, whatever they may be, for example prosthodontics. We are the link between the dentist and the patient; quite often we are privileged to spend a little more time with the patient which allows for questions to be asked that the patient may have been worried about but may have felt they were not able to ask at the initial exam appointment.

If I encountered a young person considering a career as a dental hygienist/therapist, I would say to them 'go for it!' It is a very interesting, challenging, rewarding and fulfilling career!

Interview by Kate Maynard.

*Dental therapist Vocational Training

Kira Hammond, Dental Therapist Vocational Training Advisor at NHS Education South Central, explains how this innovative new scheme works.

Friederike is one of nine newly qualified dental therapists to participate in the Vocational Training scheme organised by NHS Education South Central (NESC). The scheme is the first of its kind in England, and was set up and designed to equip recent dental therapy graduates with the necessary training required to continue to develop and expand the clinical and personal skills learnt as a student, and to gain the skill set required to work successfully in a general dental practice environment.

The scheme has attracted graduates from a number of schools including Birmingham, Sheffield, King's, and Portsmouth, with some of the students relocating in order to participate. Unlike vocational training for dentists which is full time, the dental therapist Vocational Training scheme (TVT) involves a commitment for three days per week. During these three days the therapist trainees work in a pre-approved practice with an experienced dentist or dental therapist as their trainer. The trainers' role is an extremely important one as they are required to support the therapist trainees' further development of clinical skills and to assist them in increasing their confidence in dealing with unfamiliar situations.

As well as increasing clinical skills and

confidence, one of the aims of the therapist Vocational Training scheme is to build upon knowledge learnt at an undergraduate level and to encourage critical thinking and evidence-based practice. The educational programme consists of at least 12 study days throughout the year which focus on a variety of topics, as well as several hands-on courses designed to increase confidence and build upon technique for more advanced treatments. Interprofessional learning is encouraged between the therapist and dental VT students, and this is supported by a number of joint study days and attendance at the International Dental conference in Chicago which allows students the opportunity to appreciate how dentistry is practised outside the UK.

To date the scheme has enjoyed great success, which is mainly due to the hardworking nature of the therapist trainees and the dedication and enthusiasm of the trainers. Working with a dental therapist has been a new concept for most of the training practices, but it has been testament to how easily a therapist can be incorporated into the dental team and the valuable contribution they can make to patient care and to the practice environment in general.