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Mowbray recounts
the eye-openers,
mishaps and
rewards of
her first year in
dental nursing.

BE PATIENT WITH ME, I'M A STUDENT DENTAL NURSE

Career advice

'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I was asked that question at school when I was 6-years-old.

As a teenager at college I recall a 15 minute careers advice meeting, after which I still had no clue what I wanted to do, or aim for. If I liked working with people, I was told, I should go into hairdressing.

Well I knew that of all the thousands of jobs out there, hairdressing wasn't for me. The suggestion worried me. The idea of having someone trust you entirely with redesigning their hair – a huge vanity point to most women – was incredibly daunting. What if I cut off too much? What if I ruined the hair colour? I'm a worrier, and knowing how I would feel myself, I couldn't face making someone's hair a bird's nest.

Now, just over a year into my new profession as a student dental nurse, I relish the fact that I am helping to improve people's smiles!

Getting to know you

When I started dental nursing in September 2009, I was very nervous and yet very excited. I had been training as an adult [medical] nurse for two years previously, and didn't like the lack of personal touch and comfort given to people in the hospitals. I took entering a private dental career as a new opportunity to really enjoy being with people and looking after them properly. Regardless of the fact that the patients are paying for their treatment, no amount of money would make you give that little bit extra if you didn't want to, and I loved that every member of staff at my practice gave that extra something to every person that arrived.

The interview was bewildering and intense, and very similar to speed dating! A quick five minute chat with one of the dentists, manager or head nurse, then moving on to the next person. It was a great icebreaker; I immediately knew I really wanted the position. I had never been a dental nurse

before; my only experience was attending my own six-monthly appointments as a child. It intrigued me.

Schoolbooks and homework

My first day at work was straight in the surgery, watching the head dentist Dr Robin Bryant and his nurse Nina Farmer do their

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work. I observed the exams and a few fillings from afar, absorbing what I could. I was extremely fortunate to shadow two very patient and dedicated dental professionals, who after a while, bombarded me with information which I engrossed myself with. I had diagrams of teeth and their roots, meanings and numbers, and so many names for the sides of a single tooth! It was overwhelming but fantastic. I had always loved school and learning something new; I just didn't click with the other children learning there with me. Here, it was one on one, I could ask as many questions as I liked, however silly or perhaps irrelevant, and I was given time to work it all out. So much so, I was given 'homework' on the first day.

As I was learning, I attended night college, and quickly realised that not every dental team has that kind of time for their new staff. After a few weeks, I noticed that while the other girls were still working on reception and doing photocopying, I was cleaning down after every procedure, completing examinations on my own and memorising how fillings were set up. My team were fantastic, always giving me encouragement, pushing me to learn and grow, but with patience and compassion. I don't think many other student dental nurses have that kind of luck.

Poker face

One of the big things I learnt at the beginning was something that I had no awareness of beforehand. Maintaining control in front of a patient is a really important factor. Patients come to us with confidence and total trust, believing that we know exactly what we

are doing, and although we are human, that we won't ever make a mistake during their appointment.

However, obviously, that isn't always the case. Saying that, I've never witnessed anything drastic happening, but simple things such as flinging an instrument you're about to use at the floor, or forgetting an important step in the middle of treatment, does happen (a lot for me it seemed!).

When I began feeling confident and started procedures on my own, I believed that even with my little experience, I was fairly good at keeping my calm in front of other people. However, my dentist and nurse began commenting on my laughter and giggles. Completely unaware, when I wasn't sure what was being asked of me, or if I made a mistake, I would giggle aloud from nerves. When Robin and Nina told me what I was doing, I was very embarrassed, but it made me realise how the patients would interpret my laughter. To them, I was either messing about behind their back, or not taking it seriously. Knowing what I do, I can hold myself back when I'm anxious or feeling under pressure during a procedure, although I do still forget sometimes, at which point a 'look' usually reminds me again.

Benign syncope

After witnessing a few extractions, so my queasiness was starting to ease off, we had an apsectomy appointment appear in the day list. Not knowing what one was, my dentist briefed me on the procedure. It sounded

simple enough, like a root canal but through the apex as opposed to the tooth itself. I was told to get a good visual: to stand in between the nurse and dentist so that I could see everything. Robin was determined to make me conquer my nausea, however, halfway through, I couldn't see anything. I had closed my eyes to control my unease and dancing stomach, but opened them again to discover that I had a dead leg and was looking up from the floor at a very concerned Nina. I had fainted, slid across the sides and cupboards, and missed a main part of the procedure. When Robin had confirmed I was okay, he

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continued on his own while Nina checked on me. Tail between my legs, I was sent off to have a cup of tea. This incident was then announced at regular weekly intervals and again at the Christmas party. I still get a very funny feeling whenever I see a Mitchell's Trimmer.

Mishaps

I've had several forgetful or rather clueless moments where my improvising and common knowledge skills have not come through for me, or if they did, in a bizarre order. My first one was in a crown fit appointment, while mixing the Unichem RelyX (or as I could only remember it, the 'bumblebee'). I couldn't understand why the material wasn't mixing properly. I think I got to capsule three when I understood that I was putting them all in the activator the wrong way round. Another time, for some unknown reason, I felt it perfectly acceptable to unclick the lid open on the RelyX, *then* mix it. Again, it took a

concentration and multi-tasking skills. There is so much a dental nurse has to remember; I certainly didn't know at the beginning quite how much I needed to learn about preparation and organisation. Luckily, as Chris my dentist is well aware of now, my tidiness has become OCD in our surgery. Before I started the job, one of my friends acknowledged my new job role as 'just hoovering up spit in the gob department'. I was defensive of it then, and even more so now. I turn up to work each morning 30 minutes early just to prepare and set everything up, turn all the equipment on, organise the day's patients and procedures, and double check, then triple check that I've got enough stock for treatments. Not even mentioning being the dentist's third and fourth hands, second pair of eyes and ears, and learning how to read his mind regarding what he needs next. Hoovering? I don't think so!

do, I feel a mixture of excitement and nerves. Working with Chris, I have become more confident and am getting to know his habits and read his expressions when he's searching for an instrument. I find I can become too familiar and relaxed in my own space with Chris, so going back and forth keeps me on my toes, and tones up my intuition. Although there are always those 'SEE' appointments, predicted as a simple fractured tooth needing a filling, that turn into an elective RCT, with post and temporary crown, that throw all my preparation and nerves out the window.

Cliché but true

I entered dentistry with fresh eyes and rose-tinted glasses, and thanks to my team, they have remained glued to my head. The main component is a close team, one that has genuine compassion, not just for the coming pay-packet each month, but for the well-being

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while for me to realise that the reason there was no material coming out, was that most of it had been splatted out into the inside of the amalgamator. Not my finest moment.

Developing X-rays was becoming automatic; it was a very easy process placing the X-ray through the Velopex. However, with my mind wandering while on the way to the Velopex, I had already started opening the radiograph packet. Trying to act oblivious to the badly developed radiograph to my dentist isn't one of my strongest talents.

Another time was the dreaded feeling I got when I realised I had left an alginate impression in the sterilising container overnight. Ten minutes had turned well into ten hours, but incredibly, the alginate hadn't turned to mush and was salvageable. These unfortunate accidents reinforced my

Different dentists, different charting

As I moved from working with Robin to Dr Chris Smith, I noticed there were a lot of differences between the ways they worked. Naively I thought it would be exactly the same and was surprised when Chris would use a different composite material to Robin, or read the charting from the opposite side. There are so many materials and techniques, and each dentist trains to a separate school of thought, with individual preferences and ideas about what is best for a particular procedure. I only very occasionally work with Robin now, being Chris' full time nurse, but when I

of our clients. Even now as I sit here finishing writing this, I'm surrounded in the staffroom by my team, in fits of laughter, enjoying each other's company, no complaints about the afternoon ahead.

Dentistry is manic, eye-opening and exhausting, but I love every minute of it. I can't count how many times Chris and I have been in the middle of rebuilding a posterior tooth, and I smile to myself thinking, I love my job!

The photos in this article depict Claire with dentist Dr Chris Smith.