‘Dental health care is a *two-person* endeavour’

Tara Taheri had some spare time on her hands when she moved to the UK from Iran in 2000. She began with dental nursing but is now undertaking a Master’s degree in Health Psychology.

From Tehran to London Bridge

I am from Tehran, the capital of Iran, but I met my British husband while visiting relatives in London and we were married in 1988. My husband is operations director of an international construction company so for the first ten years of our marriage I took care of my family and supported my husband, who was assigned to work in Iran and then in Russia. Our son Keearash was born in 1989 followed by our second son Kourosh in 1991.

In the year 2000 we decided to return to the UK to ensure our young sons started secondary school in the UK and went through the British education system. Now that I was in the UK with my sons both at school, I found that I had more spare time. Before I was married I completed a BA in Child Psychology at Tehran University, but motivated by my desire to have contact with people from different backgrounds throughout the day, I decided to study a dental nursing course. I worked at a dental practice in St John’s Wood and qualified as a dental nurse in 2001.

I then decided to continue studying and undertook the oral health education course at the Eastman Dental Hospital. I also studied dental radiology at Hertfordshire University in 2002, a course that took place one day a week for one year.

With further qualifications under my belt I was hungry to continue my education. In 2003 I

applied for a dental hygiene course at Guy’s and King’s Hospital as a mature student. I was elated when I was given a place on the course.

I enjoyed the clinical work with patients the most; a good mixture of clinical with attending lectures made my days interesting. It was challenging for me personally to have to commute to university in London Bridge for an hour on the tube every single day as a full time student with a family. The initially faint then gradually more realistic goal of what I would be able to achieve motivated me and gave me the encouragement I needed to continue with the course. I qualified as a dental hygienist in 2005.

As a clinician I felt that I needed to take a more proactive and responsible role in the education and care of my patients. I was also influenced by my background in psychology, so am currently studying for an MSc in Health Psychology.

Health psychology

The field of health psychology is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the application of psychological knowledge and technique to health/illness and health care. Health psychologists apply psychological knowledge, research and intervention to promote and improve health, the health care system and to inform health policy. They work with patients, carers, families, health community members and health care professionals, in groups with individuals and with organisations.

Health psychology is concerned with understanding the relationship between mind and body as these affect the overall state of an individual’s well-being. Health communication contributes to the promotion of good health and prevents diseases.

Effective communication can have a therapeutic effect in itself. Although the major focus is on verbal communication, non-verbal communication is also important in interpersonal settings. Improvement in the quality of communication can have significant benefits for both patients and service providers. It can result in greater patient satisfaction with health care services, increase patient adherence to treatment regimens, decrease patient anxiety and distress, improve mental health and improve health promotion.

The aim of patient education is to blur the

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boundaries between professional as teacher, and patient, as learner. Patient empowerment aims to involve the patient more in their health care. When asking a patient to make changes in their own or their child's lifestyle, it is necessary to consider the depths of learning that this change requires. Different depths of learning will help to measure the levels of knowledge required. It is important to measure a patient's level of understanding before they leave to ensure they know why they are carrying out a particular task. In oral health promotion activities it is important to consider the ways in which people learn, levels of understanding and the skills they will need to carry out any behavioural changes.

The clinical role of psychology as health providers is diverse. The varying areas of care-giving include primary, secondary and tertiary care. Health psychology involves adapting and testing the efficacy of both psychological and biological interventions to promote health and overcome disorders. The impact of dental symptoms includes not only physical but also psychological and social dimensions. The advantage of understanding and applying practical psychological strategies can improve professional-patient interaction and overcome barriers to dental care. We can also address issues of undue stress on dental professionals and explore ways of reducing it.

Applying my studies

I work two days a week as a dental hygienist in a Harley Street dental practice while I study for my Master's degree.

I think that my course has given me an improved understanding of patients' needs. My MSc thesis is on a topic related to the prevention of diseases and improvement of health. I am planning to implement patient specific dental health education and a patient awareness programme. I will assess the outcomes:

improvements in dental health and hygiene of a group of patients against a control group.

I thrive on contact with different people from different walks of life and cultural backgrounds. 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.

Being British

My sons are at university now studying Pharmacy and Architecture and Civil Engineering but both still live at home so it is still challenging managing my time between work, study and looking after the household.

Now that I have been in the UK for over ten years full-time, I feel British and very much appreciate British culture. At the same time my Persian heritage is very rich and as a family we maintain certain Persian customs and traditions such as respect to the elders of the family, providing support to family members, celebrating Persian New Year and Persian poetry. I also visit my mother in Iran every year.

Looking forward

I intend to continue my postgraduate study with a PhD in the same field, exploring the relationship between patient awareness and empowerment to dental health improvement. In order to do the research I will continue working part-time as a dental care professional (DCP) to try and test different methods and investigate patient behavioural change.

Dental health care is a two-person endeavour rather than something that one person does to another. I believe that there is a place for a more in-depth approach to the psychology of patient care in the dental hygiene training syllabus. This would provide the dental hygienist with a better understanding of psychological models and theories of behaviour change and oral hygiene behaviour, which would have a huge impact on interventions. Taking such a step would mean that a dental hygienist not only enhances their own professional career but also enhances and advances our professional roles in general.

I would encourage any member of the dental profession to continue their studies and strongly recommend that dental hygienists seek out additional training to understand patient psychology and thereby promote dental health.