

*'After all that time in private practice, working as a GDP in an NHS practice was not the experience I hoped it would be...'*

# Dentistry

## – thinking outside the box

*For Liz Robb, returning to the UK after 25 years away meant a return to the dental career she thought she'd long since left behind. Here she explains how a chance look at an advertisement led her to a course that would broaden her outlook and give her the opportunity to progress in ways she never thought possible.*

Returning to the UK in the cold of December after 25 years of living under the warmth of an African sun wasn't easy, particularly as it meant leaving a beloved Zimbabwe. But with two teenage sons to finish their education, a pension made worthless by several years of treble digit inflation, the collapse of the infrastructure and services previously taken for granted and the awful realisation that we were not getting any younger, it was with a very heavy heart that we arrived at Gatwick airport in the depths of winter with four large and very overweight suitcases to begin new lives in the UK. Not easy at any age, and certainly not when you're over 50.

At the age of 45 I thought that I had left dentistry behind for ever and spent a challenging five years as the founder Director of Childline Zimbabwe. Whilst Childline proved to be a real success story, who in England would know of the work started there? The realisation that a return to dentistry was realistically the only option wasn't easy to accept and was certainly not what I wanted, but for both income and pension purposes, needs must.

Joining the South West Deanery KITS was probably the best move I made after making a home in the West Country. Everyone was most welcoming and I was put in touch with the Back to Practice course at King's College London. I thought that it was my competence that had gone, but they soon showed me that it was my confidence that was lacking. After working for 20 years, those basic skills were deeply ingrained and returned in a frighteningly short period of time. However, after all that time in a private practice, working as a GDP in an NHS practice was not the experience that I hoped it would be, and I knew within a couple of days that there was no possibility of completing my working life on that treadmill.

Not having any contacts in the UK for a return to private practice, it seemed that my best option would be to join the salaried services whilst I looked around for opportunities. A very

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warm welcome awaited, and soon it was business as usual with a brand new surgery, well qualified and experienced staff, and a somewhat lowly but guaranteed cheque at the end of the month. No staffing, equipment or cash flow worries, what a pleasure! I decided I'd stay.

The consequences of being over 50 and without a pension aren't very funny, and although the job was fine, it soon dawned that I would have to work towards a postgraduate qualification if I was to get anywhere within the salaried services, and time was in short supply. Better to leave the world of implantology to the youngsters, an MSc in gums didn't appeal either and I was too old for strict academia. It must have been serendipity that drew my attention to an advertisement in the dental press for the Faculty of General Dental Practice (UK) (FGDP(UK)) Dental Health Services Leadership and Management course. It seemed to be just up my

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street – a recognised combination of dentistry and operational and strategic management, offering a broader look at dentistry from outside the box. The world of UK dentistry was about to change, so maybe here was my opportunity.

The course is designed not only for the salaried services, corporate dental bodies and those involved in the development of dental services within Primary Care Trusts, but also for the needs of the busy GDP, especially those involved as dental advisers or with their LDCs. It aims to assist in managing a business, in the widest of contexts, more effectively. Fellow students are from all branches of the profession and are perhaps more mature than might normally be expected, often leading to some excellent interactive participation and very late after dinner discussions.

To be honest, after the first residential weekend in Harrogate (now also available in Gatwick), I was not at all sure that the course was for me. It was just very different and challenged me in a completely different way to anything that I had done before. As it turns out, this is the real strength of the course, as it makes you look in depth at different aspects of your practice or business. It really is ‘thinking outside the box’ in its broadest sense, with even the less than exciting sounding ‘Personal Development’ turning the way I saw dentistry completely on its head.

One of the major features of the course is the calibre of the lecturers that the course directors manage to attract. Many of the well-known names in dentistry, whether from the BDA, GDC, DPB or elsewhere, give up their precious weekends to travel to Harrogate or Gatwick and it is worth attending for this alone. There was only one lecture that didn’t go down too well, but this was not really the fault of the speaker – even the keenest of us found the subject of Employment Law timetabled for after lunch on the Saturday just a bit too much to handle! Fortunately, the course is by its very nature dynamic and evolving, so I doubt that the same mistake will be made again.

Spread over a period of not more than three years, the full course leading to the Certificate consists of six units which can be taken in any sequence, but students can choose to do only

those units which interest them. Module titles include Personal Development, Managing your Business, Dentistry in the Wider Context, Law, Ethics and Risk, Quality Management, and Personnel and Resources. This is followed by a written assignment of some 3,000 words. To start with this seems like a daunting task, but not for long, as researching a subject of relevance to everyday practice quickly becomes all absorbing and the problem soon becomes condensing the assignment down to the word limit.

For those interested in the FGDP(UK) career pathway leading to the FFGDP(UK), successful completion of the course gains 60 postgraduate credits which are fully transferable. This is an added bonus, however; the bottom line is that it is just an excellent course and ideal for anyone interested in the bigger picture. At the request of past students, consideration is currently being given to further developing the course to Diploma level.

Now that I have completed the course, I very much hope that this, together with the current push to provide leadership and management opportunities to clinicians within the NHS, will provide me with the opportunity to progress within the organisation. The FGDP(UK) and the course directors, Dr Paul Batchelor from UCL/Eastman and Dr Russ Ladwa, GDP and Chairman of the Dental Vocational Training Authority are to be congratulated on their foresight in producing this very different course which stretches the grey cells in an unusual and effective way.

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