

We have the *skills*, now let us use them!

Debbie McGovern's passion for patient care is matched by a gritty determination to improve the status of dental therapists while she is BADT President.



A few weeks ago, a young child was brought into the Liverpool Dental Spa practice where Debbie McGovern was working. There was no dentist on the premises so, officially, Debbie was not allowed to get the child out of pain. As all therapists know only too well, the rules of the current GDS contact only allow a dentist to diagnose; without a dentist's diagnosis, notwithstanding Debbie's knowledge and competence, treatment was not permissible.

Ironically, Debbie also works in a private practice – the Dental Spa is a small group of four practices established by Debbie and her dentist husband, Marius -where, under the rules of direct access, she would have been

allowed to diagnose and treat the child there and then. Where is the sense, or humanity Debbie asks, in allowing those who can most afford dental care easiest access?

The disparity between the freedoms afforded to dental care professionals in the NHS compared to private dentistry is a regular frustration for Debbie. But she is hopeful that she can continue to drive change over the course of the two years in which she is President of the British Association of Dental Therapists.

She has big ambitions. 'I would love it,' she said, 'if during my presidency I can build a profile around what therapists can do.' Even within dentistry, there are people who think therapists can only provide small fillings to children. But, she says, they can provide all

sorts of fillings from an amalgam to a large composite on patients of all ages.

Says Debbie: 'Dentists' skills are so much better employed elsewhere. We should be encouraged to get on with the routine restorative work.' She is aware that some general practices have introduced therapists to their team but it hasn't worked because the right systems aren't in place.

It's much easier, she says, to set up a practice from scratch with dental therapists at the heart of dental provision. 'All the dentists who work at our Dental Spa practices say they could not work without their dental therapists.'

She believes the contract is a barrier to successfully using dental therapists and she is keen to draw attention to this. On the list of people she wants to meet is public health minister Steve Brine who she heard speak at the All Party Parliamentary Group for Dentistry in the House of Commons. She believes he will be sympathetic to her cause due to the emphasis he placed on prevention.

She is also planning to engage with student dental therapists. She wants each university to have a dental therapy student representative so therapists of the future are thoroughly invested in. BADT was established 57 years ago and during her Presidency she wants to build a strong agenda and committed membership.

Never in a million years, she says, did she think that she would end up as President of her professional organisation. There was a brief time as a teenager when she wasn't sure about her career. But then she got a part-time job as a dental receptionist and there was no turning back.

'From the second I stepped into a dental practice, I loved it. I think it was just in me.'

In her family, healthcare is in the genes. Her mother is a nurse, her aunty a health visitor and another aunty a midwife. From there she decided she wanted to be a dental nurse and trained at the hospital and then went on to Manchester University to study for a BSc in Oral Health Sciences.

She and Marius also get great satisfaction out of their charitable work. The Liverpool Dental Spa organised a ball and raised £25k to fund the team going to Morocco to provide dental care to children. They have been twice, she says, and it's very moving to have young children walk for four hours to come and see you.

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It was at Manchester that she met her husband, Marius, and when they got together, a dental dynasty was born!

There are seven dentists in the family, including her husband, her brother-in-law, her nephew and three nieces. She and Marius have four children aged between 26 and 13 and one of them is already training to be a dental therapist.

'You can imagine what it's like when we get around a table and we all talk about teeth! We really are a family who live and breathe dentistry.'

At work, Debbie enjoys mentoring therapists doing their vocational training. She is always happy when she can spend time providing oral health prevention. 'I love educating patients, I am a bit of a gabby Annie. I get great job satisfaction out of seeing patients change their habits and start to look after their teeth.'

They are very conscious, too, of the enormous dental need in the UK. 'When we retire, we want to get a dental van and treat the homeless. Our attitude is that God gave us these skills so why should we not put them to good use helping others as well as earning a living.'

In the meantime, for the next two years, she is committed to BADT and advancing its cause. Big organisations are starting to realise, she says, that dental therapists will be central to the new dental contract.

'It's a very interesting time to be President and I intend to make the most of it.'

Debbie has been in dentistry for over 25 years having started out as dental nurse at Liverpool University Dental Hospital (LUDH). She went on to do a Bachelor of Science degree – Oral Health Science – in 2004 at Manchester University. She was one of the few final year students to undertake the combined Dental Therapy and Orthodontist Therapist degree. During her 13 years on the council of BADT she has held several roles including the Chair and now President. Everything goes in fours for Debbie, who with her husband has 4 practices (1 private and 3 NHS), 4 children and 4 is the number of the house where she lives!

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