Bog standard name

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I knew from a relatively young age that I wanted to be a writer of some sorts. I'd be lying if I said that vision entailed being an editor of two dental publications, but now I'm here I would also be lying if I didn't say it was awesome.

It just goes to show that you never know which way the river of your career will meander, no matter what goals you set yourself when you're younger. The value of lived experiences and circumstance will intervene, *Sliding Doors* ect, and take your chosen career off on tangents that you didn't see coming – my own is a perfect example.

Which is why I was most intrigued to see one dental student quoted in their local press saying *'I'm not planning on being a standard NHS dentist, I want to be one of those dentists who works on famous people or in cosmetics.'*

A peculiar turn of phrase, one must admit. The reaction on *Twitter* was just as intriguing, with users offering the student in question life and career advice, free of charge, and most were rather displeased that they were referred to as 'standard NHS dentists', the inference being drawn that it was perhaps not something to aspire to.

When I first saw the tweet highlighting this, my instinct was to grab the popcorn and

get comfy for an afternoon of drama. I read the article and felt sorry for the student in question – as journalists, we are there to seek out the good stuff in interviews through the chaff, rather like pigs snuffing out truffles. This was clearly going to be the phrase that would be seized upon by fellow dental professionals, and let's face it, understandably so. There is absolutely nothing standard about working for the NHS, an institute marvelled and admired across the globe. There is nothing standard about NHS dentistry – it is far from perfect, but it serves people who at times even see the £23.80 as a barrier to visiting their dentist. There is nothing standard about working as an NHS dentist treating patients in a target-driven system like they're on a conveyor belt that is grossly out of date and unreflective of the population it needs to serve. Is there even such a thing as a 'cosmetic dentist'? If there is, isn't it a title that applies to every dental practitioner?

The way I see it, far from being outlandish and wildly inaccurate, the student's *faux pas* was to break one of life's great rules: never speak the unspoken and say things many will think but too few are afraid to say for fear of recrimination. To this end, perhaps there should be some respect for this honesty, even if it most certainly could have been phrased better. For anyone who has handed back their NHS contract or chosen to provide a fully private service – isn't it the system's imperfections that have nudged you towards greater clinical freedom? Isn't it because of the grotesque UDA

system that you've handed your NHS contract back? Isn't it the stress of not being able to have the time you really want with patients that has made you reconsider your career path? Isn't it true that in many, many cases private work fees help to subsidise NHS work?

Of course, these points have all been collated through years of experience. Simply stating a dental student does not have the requisite experience to make these assessments doesn't mean they are wrong or haven't taken place through their circumstances. Is there anything wrong with having definitive life goals? Isn't the issue with the phrasing and framing of 'being a standard NHS dentist' and that in reality it's a little close to the bone for some?

Dentists – NHS, those offering mixed and fully private – are all cogs in the same machine. Each are as valuable, do not and cannot survive without the other. And let's not forget career aspirations are important too, particularly at a time when recruitment into the profession is slowing. Do we really want to disparage those who wish to evolve their career at the expense of putting them off dentistry altogether? Can the profession afford to?

Who knows where this dental student's career will meander – it isn't for you or I to suggest the path it will take. Yet there is one thing we can guarantee; when the time comes to don the training wheels and treat patients prior to qualifying, they will realise there is nothing standard about being an NHS dentist at all. ♦ <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41404-021-0839-8>