‘I hope to pass on my passion for mouth care and dental hygiene’

Christine Thomas, 48, describes her very varied

week working as a dental hygienist in Cardiff.

I usually get up at 6 am. I live with my ‘other half’ and have one teenage son. I usually have tea and toast at home before leaving for work. My home town was Edinburgh, although my family are Welsh, and I left Edinburgh to move to Swansea when I was 19.

I work at various sites in Cardiff which is 50-60 miles away from home. I travel by car as I regularly have to be in different hospital sites for the peripheral hospital service.

I am a dental hygienist for Cardiff and the Vale University Health Board, Hospital Dental service and Peripheral Hospital Dental Service and a very busy NHS practice in a very culturally diverse area of Cardiff. I treat a wide variety of patients; in Cardiff dental hospital I treat patients who are medically compromised, head and neck and oncology patients, and periodontal patients who have been referred by their own dentist. I also treat patients under conscious sedation (inhalation) who are anxious. In the peripheral hospital service, I see a wide variety of patients, who are in-patients, some long term. The patients are seen on wards or can come to a purpose-built surgery; they include patients living with dementia, mental health patients, patients who have had surgery and those who have suffered a stroke, and older adults.

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I work full time five days a week: two days for the peripheral hospital service, two days in general practice and one day in Cardiff Dental Hospital.

I originally got into dentistry as a dental nurse after leaving school. I worked with a dental hygienist who was so passionate about dental hygiene and she passed that passion on to me.

I knew I wanted to work in nursing, but I was not sure which area; somehow it became dental. I trained as a dental nurse and had to work for two years chairside to achieve this; I then moved to Wales and worked in a very busy orthodontic practice, which I loved, then moved on to work in a hospital dental department with a mix of orthodontics, restorative and periodontal patients, whilst applying for my dental hygiene course.

I qualified as a dental hygienist in 1999 (20-year anniversary this year), and then I worked in various private practices in and around South West Wales.

Ten years ago, I started working as a Dental Health Improvement Practitioner (Dental Health Educator) for an all Wales Dental Health Improvement programme, then started to work within Cardiff Dental Hospital.

I love to pass knowledge on which enables patients, carers and nurses to make a difference and improve their mouths and general health, or those of others. The thing I enjoy the most is the variety of my days and the variety of patients/people I see and meet.

The thing I find most challenging can be special care patients when they are upset or do not understand the treatment we are carrying out. Explaining what we are doing or why can be difficult. I also find seeing my patients age and deteriorate health wise challenging, especially patients living with dementia.

As I work in the hospital services, I work within a very large multi-disciplinary team: nurses, consultants, doctors, dental therapists, students, the sterilisation team, and the administration team. In practice I work with three dental nurses, the principal dentist and an associate.

I was involved for nine years in oral health: it was an All Wales Oral Health improvement programme for children. Then my role diversified into improving adult oral health whilst in hospital. I provided lectures to student (general) nurses whilst they were undergoing their training, and Health Care Support Workers training (within hospitals), I also sat on a team who designed an All Wales Programme including assessments and care plans for adult and paediatric patients whilst in hospital. My time working in oral health education programmes ignited something inside me for Dental Public Health, especially mouth care in hospitals and its links with systemic health.

I have attained a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. I undertook a course in conscious sedation and use this regularly within the dental hospital. I have updated and maintained my skills and use these skills on a daily basis. I have attained a Diploma in Dental

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Public Health and found this course most enlightening and informative.

I usually have a packed lunch, as sometimes we are out and about moving from site to site. I usually eat with the team.

I tend to get my CPD hours from the wide selection offered by Cardiff University Postgraduate Department. Online courses and webinars, some study days also. I tend to have study days within the hospital service, not so much from general practice, due to the timing of the courses, although the practice is happy to accommodate changes of days if a course requires it.

I usually get home about 6 pm as the travel time required is about an hour.

I love to run (although some days it is a real effort); my running is not just for physical health. I love to walk and regularly walk the Welsh coastal path and hope one day to complete the whole coastline. I usually have my dog as a companion. Stand up Paddle Boarding is also a great physical activity and good for the soul and little bit of quiet escapism.

I like to get away as a family in our caravan and explore.

I tend to go to bed at 10 pm weekdays and maybe a little later at the weekends.

I hope to complete my Master's in Dental Public Health. I am currently procrastinating whilst attempting to write my dissertation about mouthcare in hospitals.

I would love to teach further and hope to pass on my passion for mouth care and dental hygiene; mentoring is also an area I would love to explore further, as it is about enabling the mentee to find the answers.

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