‘So you’re a therapist for the dentist?’

Laura Marshall, dental hygienist and therapist and reader panel member, writes about the public perception of a dental therapist.

What is a dental therapist?

What is a dental therapist? I asked my friends, and friends of friends (n = 25, from non-dental backgrounds, mostly located in West Yorkshire), if they knew what a dental therapist was and if they felt they had a good understanding of the different roles in the dental team.

The results? See Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Some were able to offer a fair explanation suggesting the dental therapist acts in a supportive role and aids with oral health. Others showed great misunderstandings around the role, comparing a dental therapist to an assistant that aids the dentist in clinical procedures, or a counsellor to overcome dental fears and phobias.

All were able to answer comfortably that they felt confident in what a dentist was. However, evidently there was general confusion on the role of a dental therapist and a lack of confidence in understanding the dynamics of the dental team.

‘Dental therapist ... so you’re a therapist for the dentist?’ Genuine example of public misconception

As a dental therapist myself, I find myself in countless positions explaining what it is I do and why dental therapy is a necessary role within the dental profession.

When I first started training as a dental therapist I was so passionate and confident that dental therapy was going to be the next big move forward in dentistry. Patients would comment ‘I’ve never heard of a dental therapist’, and I would positively assure them that the position was becoming more abundant and the role would soon have a greater public awareness.

I truly believed that through an expanding dental team of professionals we would be more diversely equipped to aid in the extensive dental need among the population by acting to share the responsibility of care.

‘So you’re the one who passes the instruments to the dentist?’ 1st year trainee dentist

But the reality, it seems, is that people just don’t know what a dental therapist is. Is it the title of the position that causes confusion - in relation to the word ‘therapy’? Or perhaps there just aren’t enough dental therapists around for people to be familiar with the role.

Through discussions with my peers, it seems all too frequent that a dental therapist defaults to the title and role of a dental hygienist. It is thought-provoking to consider that there are highly trained dental professionals confining their competent skills and capabilities when there is an apparent need for dental treatment in the UK. Could we make better use of these skill sets and in doing so enhance public awareness of the dental team?

‘What is it exactly that you do?’ Dentist acting as interviewer for a dental therapy vacancy

On 20 November 2019, BBC News highlighted the macroeconomic issues behind accessing dental treatment. It brought to our attention the trials of many individuals in their efforts to access necessary dental care, and overcome

How would you explain what a dental therapist is?

When I'm explaining my role I recite something like this: 'A dental therapist is similar to a dental hygienist, able to provide treatment for the gums and oral hygiene advice. But a dental therapist can also do many other treatments like fillings or children's extractions.'

The GDC Scope of practice is able to offer an extensive explanation of the role, responsibilities and treatment that a dental therapist can offer.

the extensive waiting lists that have come to be expected for dental examinations and treatment [prior to the pandemic].

The enigma of accessing care appears to echo throughout the National Health Service. In parallel we see GP services also strained with patient load and vast waiting times. In order to ease numbers and stresses, there have been public awareness campaigns advertising the push to make effective use of the wider team and acting to utilise the explicit skills of pharmacists, for example.

I can't help but wonder if the same approach could be adapted to dental care, by enhancing public awareness of the different roles within our teams and acting to share the responsibility of care in order to reduce dental waiting times.

'Dental therapist ... you're a counsellor for my teeth?' Genuine example of public misconception

Undoubtedly there are many practices that already implement fantastic use of the full dental team. But nationally, could we be doing more? Evidently, so many patients are still confused by what a dental therapist is.

All too often we see what I call the 'revolving door system': a vast number of patients waiting to see the dentist, with the expectations that only the dentist is able to complete their treatment, resulting in them waiting again after their exam... for the dentist. Could we be doing more to ensure we are using our teams to their full potential and capabilities?

With the current climate and uncertainties surrounding the pandemic, more than ever we need to be working as a functional team with all gloved hands on deck.

With hopes for the future, perhaps one day, with an abundance of dental professionals and a greater public awareness behind dental roles, we will no longer hear the question: 'What is a dental therapist?'

Fig. 1 Do you know what a dental therapist is?

Fig. 2 Would you say you have a good understanding of the different roles in a dental team?

Fig. 3 Age of the survey participants

Further reading

■ General Dental Practice. *Scope of practice*. 2013. Available at: https://www.gdc-uk.org/docs/default-source/standards-and-guidance/scope-of-practice/scope-of-practice-september-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=d22de837_2 (accessed October 2020).

■ Trigg N. Millions 'missing out' on NHS dentistry. *BBC News* 20 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-50467776> (accessed October 2020).

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0438-2>