

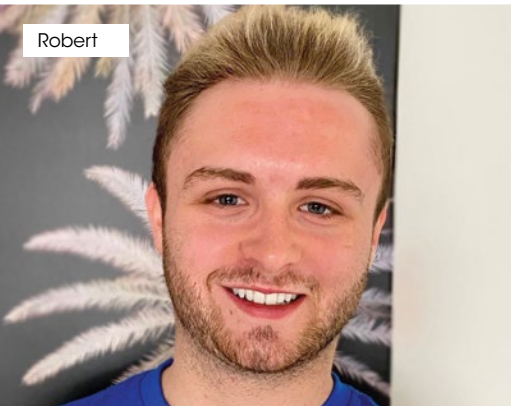
Reshma



Safiya



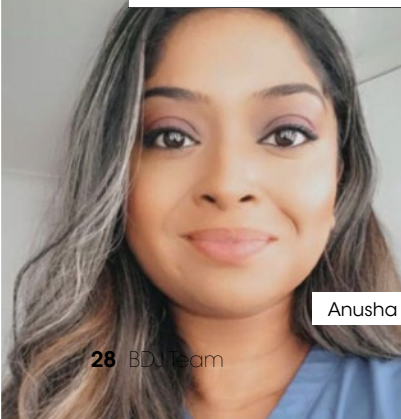
Robert



Samaya



Anusha



Becoming successful dental therapists in challenging times

Robert Leigh, Michael Seidel-Haas, Reshma Chavda, Megan Browne, Molly O'Neill, Samaya Sheikh, Anusha Sivabalan, Jessica Brydges and Safiya Ibrahim, all final year dental therapy students at UCLH NHS Trust, describe their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Midway through March the decision was made that our clinical dental education would be paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic, throwing us all - both staff and students - into feelings of uncertainty. Emotions and tensions were at an all-time high, as the hard work and effort that we had all poured in came to an abrupt pause. Our tutor team decided to utilise the time that we now faced out of clinical service in order to focus on our academic progression and bring all of the final topics forward onto an online learning platform, a first for all of us. In addition to this we utilised the online learning platform to carry out group work which allowed us to socially interact despite the isolation.

Taking stock

This unique situation has given us a lived experience of resilience to change, and the chance to take stock of our knowledge and reflect upon our academic experiences. The sudden pause to our clinical work was challenging for many of us as we had just begun to feel confident treating patients and making clinical decisions. Worries and uncertainties of 'What if I have lost my skills and confidence?' were present in many of our minds.

We had days lacking in motivation and faced challenges in trying to learn the remainder of a heavily practical course from our bedrooms. Having a routine from our tutors with daily lectures and seminars gave

us some structure to our days, as well as purpose and a sense of belonging. This structure, along with a routine that offered more flexibility, meant that we were able to plan our work around our leisure activities, a privilege that is not usually present in many of our daily lives. This pause allowed us to focus on other areas of our lives that we normally wouldn't have the chance to, whether this be returning to previous roles in the NHS, dealing with family issues or simply just taking some time to focus on ourselves and those around us while we managed the uncertainties.

Motivation and morale

Slowly as the initial emotions of the uncertainty of our education and qualification dates being delayed began to subside, we started to learn to take the rough with the smooth and adapt to this new way of life. We found simple activities such as referring daily to the five year plans that we had previously written helped massively with keeping up our motivation and morale. These plans encompass our ambitions and hopes for our future careers, and allowed us to keep our minds on track of goals, seeing if they matched those at the start of our journey.

We had to remind ourselves of why we embarked on a career in dental hygiene and therapy, the reasons for progressing to this stage in our lives, reflecting on previous challenges, and how we got through them. Keeping this in mind it was vital for us to use the time we had while 'on pause' in order to consolidate our theoretical knowledge to enable us to hit the ground running when we were allowed back into clinical service.

An exciting new venture

Both staff and students were adamant that our academic learning would not be compromised by our temporary absence off site. From our usual face to face lectures, we switched to online teaching using Microsoft Teams, an exciting and completely new venture for our school and an often challenging experience for us all! We were introduced to this completely new style of learning, in the comfort of our homes, and took every opportunity to interact with our tutors and peers online. Throughout the months, we had a series of both live and pre-recorded lectures and seminars, and even some revision sessions, giving us the opportunity to consolidate previous learning.

We were fortunate to have representatives from various trade companies such as TePe and Oralieve deliver lectures to us, and we also had lectures that enhanced our understanding of innovative topics such as personality types and stress management. We were also tasked with group work, which helped us regain our sense of unity, maintain friendships and support and avoid potential social isolation. Our virtual platform kept us engaged and motivated while we were away from our usual learning environment, and with determination to succeed, we used our new online space to

seen a busy timetable filled with revision sessions and bitesize learning opportunities. As for all members of the dental team we have had to adapt to a new way of working and treating patients in order to keep everyone safe. This has meant that we have had to separate procedures into two categories, aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) and non-AGPs. These AGP sessions have been a rare and rewarding opportunity to gain one-on-one tutor support and supervision, with our tutors acting as both our supervisors and chairside assistants. This has allowed us to further build bridges between our theoretical and clinical knowledge.

Upon our return we were also fortunate enough to obtain brand new sets of Hu-Friedy kits, which we are keen to utilise as it is not often that a dental school has the privilege of completely new sets of sharp and pristine instruments. This fantastic opportunity is ever more pertinent now as there is much more emphasis on effective hand instrumentation which has now become the standard for much of our patient care. With only limited AGP sessions, we are now more than ever focusing on patient behavioural change and motivation as a key part of the patient's treatment plan.

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share our knowledge and ideas. We also utilised this space as a platform to build our presentation skills, regardless of the initial awkwardness of speaking to a blank screen.

Re-skilling to return

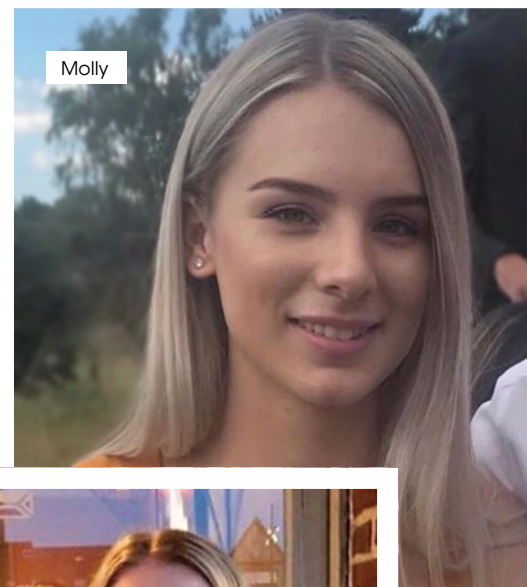
When return to clinical service was imminent we took part in a two-week re-skilling programme. This was significant for us as it recognised that we were one step closer to our return to clinics and finally treating patients. These re-skilling weeks gave us a fantastic opportunity to refresh, hone and build upon our existing skills, which we will reap the benefits of when we enter the new world of dentistry.

As well as our return to clinics, we have also

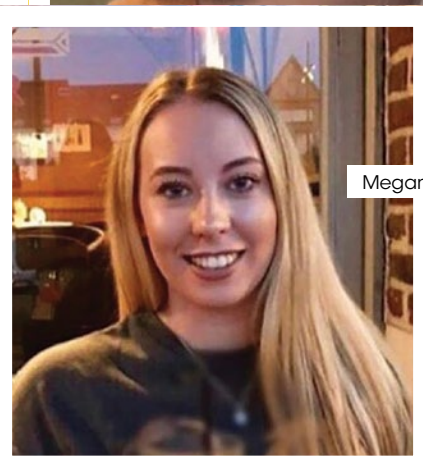
Proficient and confident

After five months of no clinical activity we are refreshed and ready to embark on this journey towards becoming successful dental therapists. Despite all the challenges we have had to overcome we have demonstrated resilience, returning as more proficient and confident clinicians. During these challenging times, we found that we had no option but to embrace and live the quote by Eckhart Tolle: 'If uncertainty is unacceptable to you, it turns into fear. If it is perfectly acceptable, it turns into increased aliveness, alertness, and creativity.'

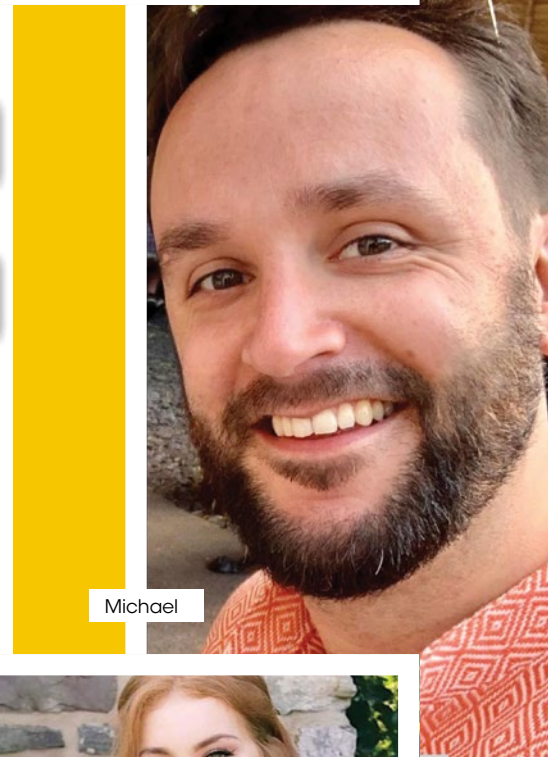
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Molly



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