

My passion to progress in dentistry



Stephanie Brown, 29, from Glasgow, recounts her journey to finding out just where she wants to be.

Starting in dentistry

I left school in 4th year with Standard Grades and hadn't fully decided what I wanted to do as a career. I had tried a hairdressing apprenticeship and had applied to do beauty therapy at college. All I did know was that I wasn't ready to go to university; I wanted some life experience and to earn some money beforehand.

I decided that the beauty industry wasn't for me and started a part time job in retail while I decided what I wanted to do. I eventually became an administrative assistant, which bored me to tears! It became apparent quite quickly that I needed to do something that involved using my hands and my brain.

A friend of mine was undergoing extensive dental treatment and she had suggested that I look into dental nursing as a career. I had never thought about it before, so I had a look online and found a job description. It ticked all my boxes: working with the public, medical environment, manual dexterity and involved a qualification at the end of my training.

I sat down one day and opened the Yellow Pages and went through the long list of Glasgow-based dental practices. I called every one in a ten-mile radius, and with a direct bus route. Eventually a practice on St George's Cross offered me an interview. I attended, nervously as I wasn't sure what to expect. The dentist there was friendly and welcoming, the practice was modern and state of the art. I instantly knew I had to get this job and I did! I started the following week and thus began my career in the dental industry.

Moving on

I remained at the position in Glasgow for six months and decided I wanted to move to a practice closer to home. I had an interview with a practice 20 minutes from my house and I was offered the position. This is where I completed my dental nurse training.

The practice was a primarily NHS practice and we saw between 30 and 40 patients a day; it was not unusual for the principal dentist to be double booked throughout the day with emergencies. We saw little to no private patients and cosmetic treatment was not readily available in this practice. I learned a lot about NHS dentistry while working here; I quickly understood the demand for emergency treatment and the time restrictions involved with running a fully NHS practice.

Before I completed my training, an opportunity arose that I could travel to Perth, Western Australia to live with a friend of mine for a year. After a short discussion with my parents, who were not thrilled due to the fact that I was 19-years-old at the time, I made the decision to complete my training and move shortly after Christmas. I applied for a one-year Working Holiday Visa and it was granted shortly afterwards.

In the December I sat my dental nursing exam, quit my job and booked a flight. On 27 December I was leaving my life behind and starting a new one in the sun. I landed in 37C heat and was ready to hit the beach.

I began looking for a job quite soon afterwards. I had several interviews but due to

stipulations with my visa I could only work for a maximum of six months at a time and many employers were looking for someone more permanent.

I was lucky enough to stumble across an advert for a dental nurse position in a beautiful practice in Alfred Cove. I met with the dentist who had a very interesting backstory. Dr Maree Lawson was a South African dentist who had begun her career as a dental nurse. This to me was unheard of. I enjoyed listening to how she became a dentist and the challenges she overcame. This inspired me to move further in dentistry and ultimately my goal was to become a dentist too.

Dentistry in Australia

Dr Lawson taught me an entirely different side of dentistry. Dentistry in Australia is 99% private work, with almost all patients paying into a private healthcare scheme. This allows for more time to be spent with patients and I learned about cosmetic treatments such as veneers, Cerec crowns and private hygiene visits. Even the quality of materials was far superior to what I had experienced in the UK in an NHS practice, and left patients with a nice finish to their dental work.

Dr Lawson had worked in the UK under the NHS for many years before moving to Australia, so she knew all too well how I had worked previously and understood that I had some habits to change. It was very much about customer service from this point on.

Due to my visa conditions I had to leave Dr Lawson's practice. At this point I moved further south in Perth to a beachside town called Port Kennedy. I found a job in a picturesque practice that sat on Rockingham Beach. It was an old converted church and was absolutely stunning inside and out. This practice was far larger than Dr Lawson's and housed four dentists, two hygienists, six nurses, two receptionists and a practice manager.

I started this job as a receptionist. Again, the role was very customer service based. As front of house I found many of our patients had a love/hate relationship with my thick Glaswegian accent. I became very aware of how many times people asked me to repeat myself so I decided to adopt a not-so-great Australian accent! It did assist people in understanding me a bit better, however, it quickly changed back in the presence of other Scottish people!

I began assisting the practice manager in creating rotas, organising wages and approving holiday leave. I was quickly promoted to 2IC or assistant manager. This was my first management role and to be honest it happened completely by accident. The manager assisted the principal dentist on a full-time basis, therefore there was plenty of room to expand my knowledge on the management front.

I returned to Scotland in the January of the following year and decided to stay because I found out I was expecting my daughter. I wanted her to be born in the same country as me, so I waited until five months after her birth to return to Australia. Therefore, I had to resign from my position in Rockingham and begin again on my return.

I remained in Australia working part time in dental nursing roles before returning to the UK in November 2014. I had decided that in order to pursue my dream of becoming a dentist I needed to be at home. A perk of being from Scotland is that we are entitled to free education and with some of the best dental schools in the UK, why would I go anywhere else?

Back to Glasgow

On my return I decided to research how someone with only standard grades could make their way into the highly competitive world of dentistry. I was presented with the Access to Medical Studies programme at Glasgow Kelvin College. The course was designed in partnership with the University of Glasgow for mature students. It consisted of various modules in biology, chemistry, maths, psychology, and communications, with the goal that students would aim for a place in medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine. There were other students with varying goals; however, the majority were aiming for one of the three focused subjects.

I was obviously aiming for dentistry. The course itself was hard going, modules were quick and a minimum pass rate of 75% was expected for each course exam. From the beginning, the preparation for UCAS application was at the forefront of my mind. In order to apply for dentistry in the UK, it is required that an aptitude test called the UKCAT [now called the UCAT] was completed before submitting an application.

On completion of my UCAS application I waited with baited breath to hear back from the universities. I had been advised to apply for many different courses, as dentistry wasn't guaranteed. I obliged and applied to Oral Health Science at Glasgow Caledonian, Forensic Science at Strathclyde, Microbiology at Glasgow Caledonian, and Biochemistry at Glasgow University. I was met with rejections from all but one, my saving grace, the University of Glasgow.

There, it was decided: I would attend the University of Glasgow to study Biochemistry!

I very early on realised that chemistry was 110% not my gig. I managed to fail all of my chemistry modules and had to resit my first year. I fared better at my second attempt of first year and passed without much hesitation. I quickly decided to change my major to the one thing that really interested me, infections. I focused primarily on microbiology in year 2 and solely in year 3.

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Juggling and priorities

In year 3 I became more determined that I didn't want a career in science, whether it be academic or clinical. I knew that my passion and drive stayed with dentistry. I continuously worked within dentistry as a dental nurse whilst at university, even being promoted to practice manager all whilst studying for my second year exams. I had worked at this particular practice for just under a year before the owner kindly asked me to step in as practice manager whilst I was off university for the summer. The role began in March, so I was working full time during my study leave. I managed to juggle my work life, home life and study life well; it was difficult at times but I quickly grew to understand the importance of prioritising and not sweating the small stuff.

I returned to university in the September and began the final year of my studies with no solid career plan. I quickly decided that I didn't want to stay in university for the honours programme. I needed a plan quickly. A member of the team at my practice had informed me that they had received a place for the BSc in Oral Health Science at the University of the Highlands and Islands through clearance. I had always considered Oral Health Science but hadn't done anything about it. I decided to look into the course, entry requirements and how to apply. I wrote out my personal statement and applied directly to UCAS to all the universities in Scotland that offered Oral Health Science.

After what felt like forever, I began to receive responses. First to get back to me was the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI).

They had a campus in Dumfries - although that meant an hour or so travelling for me, it was still close enough. I was invited to interview in Inverness in late January. The interview process was long and daunting although the students present were helpful and encouraging. Four stations were set up to test our ability to remain calm and show empathy to a patient receiving bad news, problem solving in a team, interview skills and essay writing abilities. I left feeling fairly confident, and rightly so I as soon learned

I had received a place.

Shortly afterwards I received notice from Glasgow Caledonian University and was invited to interview there. Their interview process was far more straightforward and it was a purely interview situation with two lecturers. I had a lot riding on this place as it was the most convenient for me geographically. It took approximately four weeks before I heard anything and to my surprise, I received an unconditional place! I was not expecting this as I left the interview feeling far less confident than the one at UHI.

I finished my final year exams at Glasgow and graduated with a BSc in Infection Biology with Merit. Due to COVID-19 we were unable to have a graduation ceremony within the university with my peers, but my family still made sure the occasion was celebrated!

Oral Health Science

As of now, I have just begun my place on the BSc in Oral Health Science at Glasgow Caledonian University, and I am thoroughly enjoying the challenge. It is strange doing 100% of lectures online and one day per week in clinic training on the phantom heads. I feel like I have found exactly where I want to be, in clinical dentistry. Once I have qualified, I hope to further train in facial aesthetics and teeth whitening, hoping to bring patients an integrated facial aesthetics and oral hygiene clinic that allows patients to be seen on the day for their hygiene, whitening or facial aesthetic needs.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0468-9>