

# An abundance of ambition

**Gemma Cowen** started her career in the Army and, after undertaking a dental nursing apprenticeship, is now studying to become a dental therapist at UCLAN.

## Joining the Army

My career started nearly 21 years ago when I left school in Manchester and arrived with nothing but a suitcase at the Army apprenticeship college in Reading, Berkshire.

My parents supported me as an eager 16-year-old with my decision to serve my country in the British Army.

Eight years later I decided I would like a change of scenery. The British Army provides a fantastic career which takes you all over the world and provides experiences like no other, but I really couldn't see myself staying the full 22 years: there was so much more out there!

## Getting into dentistry

As a young teen I had a displaced missing dentition, which later was found to be an unerupted canine and premolar in the palate. At the time I found myself reflecting on and quite often being frustrated that I was unable to complete orthodontics to correct and give me a smile I could be proud of.

I had now left the Army and was settled in the North East area as manager of a team of engineers for Virgin Media. I found adapting to this role came with challenges and few rewards, as a customer facing role that was driven by KPI (key performance indicators) that was affected by individual team performances.

Organisation redundancies were discussed and I decided to accept. This made me reflect on my military past and evaluate what I was looking for in a career.

My dental surgery experience from recollection - as traumatic as it was - still left me with a curiosity to understand more. I explored the different roles within the field of dentistry, which led to me researching the role of dental hygienist and therapist.

The requirements to make an application involved having five GCSEs including maths, English and science at grade C/4, plus two A-levels. Now 31-years-old and a wife and mother to two children, I felt this was unachievable. It also raised the question of

whether I would enjoy the role after meeting these requirements.

One thing I did have in abundance was ambition and armed with that, I sought alternative avenues into working in dentistry.

Bingo, I found a dental nurse apprenticeship opportunity which was free!

## Dental nursing

All I had to do was register my interest in the apprenticeship, enrol through a local college and find a placement. I was lucky to find a great practice that offered an array of treatment from NHS to private primary care.

Needless to say I fell in love with the practice; it oozed professionalism, which I missed and craved; it was a fast paced, well organised environment with highly skilled individuals that created a well drilled team offering exceptional patient care.

The methodical approach to how treatment was delivered reminded me of my previous career as a data engineer in the British Army. I became competent very quickly, with my mentor exclaiming I took to dental nursing like a duck to water!

This fuelled an interest to expand on my knowledge and opportunities. I applied for a secondary care role at Manchester dental hospital restorative department: this was next level dentistry. The patient group was varied and there was a very different approach to what I was exposed to in primary dental care. This wasn't about simple restorations; secondary care could involve giving a functioning smile back after trauma, congenital issues, oral abnormality and oral cancers. It was truly eye opening.

Given my age I felt the need to invest in myself. Dental radiography and dental implant treatments come hand in hand; an interest in these was sparked from seeing how such procedures could be used when all other options had failed.

It seemed natural to do post qualifications in both of these areas at the same time. They allow you to be really hands-on with the patient and



enabled me to have increased responsibility in my role: I would highly recommend the post-qualifications to others.

Soon after completing these I found an opportunity to complete courses in oral health education (OHE) and application of fluoride - part of a dental public health (DPH) module that was funded by the NHS. It was on completion of this DPH course provided by Chester University that I discovered I would be more than capable of undertaking a higher education course at degree level.

I emailed local and commutable universities asking what I personally would require to meet the criteria for application. This proved vital to me securing an offer.

## University applications

I re-sat my maths and biology GCSEs; my qualifications were 20 years old so I felt that I needed to refresh. Then, based on advice from the universities I emailed, I enrolled on an all science access course, which consisted of physics, biology and chemistry.

Although I didn't get to finish the course in a conventional way due to the pandemic, it undoubtedly prepared me with a base knowledge that I can build on studying at a higher level.

During my time on this course I applied to universities through UCAS. This process is long and requires patience and planning. I would suggest writing your personal statement prior to starting an access to higher education course; the workload is intense so having a draft will alleviate pressure.

Applying to study dental therapy is very

competitive with most universities only offering 16 places! I would advise taking the time to plan and think about how to make your application stand out.

This was my first time applying and I was successful in obtaining invitations to interview from two of three applications, which was followed by offers.

Interviews can seem daunting. Most medical and dental universities conduct multiple mini interviews (MMI), a series of interviews on approximately eight stations. The best thing about this type of interviewing is that there are numerous opportunities to impress. Your skills

applicant; the clinics are well equipped and the facilities are modern.

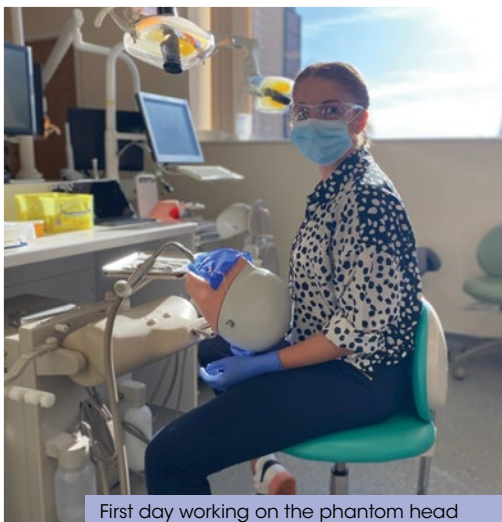
I particularly like that the BSc Hons programme involves dental education

Training exercise, Oman 2001



Online at home

*‘Week 6 on clinic and we are cutting cavities and even using composite filling material. It is such a “pinch yourself” moment: I am currently living the dream!’*



First day working on the phantom head

are accurately assessed in the areas of empathy, problem solving and critical thinking.

The next worry was achieving the conditions of the offer. I can wholeheartedly say that this was the most stressful time for me. The access course had moved online and formative assessments had replaced assignments due to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions that were in place.

Results were awarded in early June but places weren't confirmed till A-level result day in August. I cannot tell you how early I was up on that day to check my UCAS application. Refresh, refresh ... site crashed ... refresh ... and finally my offer turned to 'accepted'.

### A silent fist pump

It gave me great pleasure to secure an offer at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). I did the biggest fist pump in silence when my family were all still in bed at 8 am.

I'm so proud of my personal development that led me to this point.

UCLAN was so inviting and it just felt right. Commuting was always on the agenda and being just 23 miles from Manchester it's actually a nice commute. The correspondence was continuous and made me feel valued as an

centres (DECS), primary care clinics that give you hands-on experience with real patients. The programme integrates BDS and BSc students. Students come from a range of backgrounds: some are dental hygienists and therapists now studying to become dentists, others are pharmacists or even teachers.

### New normal

My course began on 2 September and it certainly hasn't been a conventional start to university. Online lectures can be long, intense and somewhat overwhelming and lonely being at home: you are literally face to face with a screen of names.

Up to now one of the negatives is not being able to socialise and integrate properly with other students. At the moment we can only smile behind our masks. If the masks were off, I would probably walk straight past my fellow students on campus, not recognising them.

Without a doubt the post qualifications I completed have enabled me to build on a lot of prior knowledge and this has given me a boost of confidence among my new peers and their

academic ability.

Clinical days are one to two days a week at present. Week 3 brought our first day on clinic where we were introduced to our phantom heads, a simulation of a patient attached to a dental unit that provides the opportunity to learn procedures and techniques such as handling and using the dental handpieces.

Week 6 on clinic and we are cutting cavities and even using composite filling material. It is such a 'pinch yourself' moment: I am currently living the dream!

### Future plans

My ultimate goal is to own my own practice, but first I have to focus on year one and, more importantly, anatomy right now... wow the language and terminology are something else.

If you are inspired to explore more you can head over to Instagram where you can find an amazing network of dental care professionals sharing their love for the industry.

@a\_tootherapist\_journey

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