

Becoming a mentor: giving back to the profession



By
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Introduction

As dental professionals, we undergo extensive communication and behavioural management training to help fulfil our role and duty to patients. The unique knowledge, skills and perspective we acquire with experience would be invaluable to a training, newly qualified or experienced professional. Think about what you know now and of that, what you would like to have known earlier on. Or, what you would like to have known upon encountering a hurdle in your professional career, or even personal life. If you were able to give that insight to someone else, how rewarding would that feel?

The importance of mentoring

Mentoring is the pairing of an experienced member of the dental team: the mentor, with often a less experienced member: the mentee. The aim is to help the mentee meet professional goals and to progress throughout their career. The mentor provides both coaching and educational support for the mentee, with the goal being one of tailored professional and personal development. The creation of a shared world requires all that take part to have an interest, a stake and contribution in meeting values important to the profession, organisation, or person.

2020 was a year dampened by stress for the profession and for us as professionals, we have turned to our colleagues for advice, guidance, and support. For me, this highlights another fundamental aspect of mentorship: the multidisciplinary interactions we have with each member within our amazing dental team. We each have differing experience,

expertise and perspective - which can expose life's lessons and the 'hidden curriculum' that cannot be accessed via a textbook. These interactions offer reassurance and support, which ultimately as humans we sometimes need. In a way, we are always mentoring each other.

To follow, reassurance is pivotal in our journey, from childhood to adolescence, to dental school and in practice. In practice, this becomes something we need to do ourselves. This is where mentoring and support from not only a specific mentor but also within our dental teams comes. This can also be instilled by effective peer review and clinical audits, which are recognised by our regulator through verifiable continuing professional development (CPD).

The relationship

The mentor-mentee relationship is based on reciprocal trust, respect, and open

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relationship with your prescribing dentist(s) can be extremely beneficial no matter what your career goals are. For instance, if more independence in your clinical work and decision making is something you are aiming for, being able to discuss cases aloud can consolidate understanding and empower decision making and overall confidence. Similarly, the dentist would learn more about the DCP’s full remit and thus how best to utilise it. This takes time to establish but will ensure smooth running of the practice, where patients receive consistent quality treatment from one professional to another, working as a team.

As with everything, there is training available and this is a requirement for some official mentoring roles. However, do you need a piece of paper to share your experiences and perspective with those with less experience?

I would suggest that those without formal mentors should look to colleagues and peers for assistance in navigating through academia and their careers. This is because attributes, including communication and active listening skills, in addition to willingness and time, are perhaps more influential in the success of a mentor-mentee relationship. Implementing these attitudes will harbour results, along with opportunities to reflect on your own practice. Using reflection to support others will give you reassurance, satisfaction, and motivation in return. Consequently, the mentor themselves becomes self-aware as they guide others. This can highlight a gap in your own knowledge and/or practice, where additional research or CPD would be beneficial. However, although we are all trained to the same standard, we are all entirely different people and will all, naturally have a different approach. To an extent, there is no right or wrong. We all have different attributes and different ways of utilising them.

The experience

I have been fortunate to have had continuing

and dependable mentors throughout my journey from a dental nurse, to a dental therapist and now a dental student. I have benefitted and continue to benefit in a positive way. It is natural that mentorship and teaching are part of my professional goals, to give back to the profession that I am so passionate about. I have recently had the opportunity to explore mentoring by being involved with a non-profit organisation called ‘Your Medic Family’, specifically as part of the Dental Mentor Family branch. My role entails working alongside aspiring dental students and dental professionals to support them throughout their application process.

I initially struggled with my own expectation to know everything. However, from my own clinical experience, I accepted this is not realistic. The mentor’s role is not to have knowledge on everything or be able to answer every dental related question, but to be successful and develop; mentors should be able to identify, through reflection, what information they lack and subsequently direct mentees to appropriate resources that will support their learning. The mentor is a facilitator, who signposts and nurtures.

As dental professionals, we all have the attributes and skillset that allow us to be effective mentors. It is fundamental to utilise these traits to benefit others in our profession. Time and willingness are required, but the benefits to yourself, your mentee and your dental team are invaluable and will help shape the next generation of healthcare providers that contribute to excellent patient care: the centre of our practice.

Author information

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communication from both parties. Success requires both the mentor and mentee to commit to equally important roles. It is essential that mutual boundaries are established, and the mentee should understand that the relationship is driven by them, for their own development. Additionally, it is important that both parties should engage and express a willingness to learn.

Establishing a mentor-mentee relationship should be based on similar interests and values. Effective mentoring requires a certain chemistry for an appropriately formulated interpersonal match. Like any relationship, this does not happen overnight. The mentorship can last for however long is felt necessary, but ultimately, the relationship may be valuable indefinitely. From a dental care professional’s (DCP’s) perspective, especially a dental hygienist/therapist with a prescribing dentist(s), having that mentoring