Reflective practice – What on Earth had I just done?!

Savanna Joyce,¹ with Rachel Jackson,¹ looks to highlight the importance of reflective practice in ensuring that we progress through our professional careers in the most self-fulfilling way.

I previously worked as a dental therapist before deciding to transition into dentistry. My decision to begin the Bachelor of Dental Surgery training wasn't questioned by anyone at the time. It was assumed by many that it was the obvious route for me to progress in my career, despite the fact that I had worked hard for many years to obtain my Oral Health Science degree. Many considered that being a dental therapist was a mere 'stepping-stone' to the ultimate goal of becoming a dentist, but this was not true for me.

I always wanted a job in healthcare, and 'dentistry' interested me from an early age. I wanted to make a difference to people's lives and throughout my training as a dental therapist, I felt I could achieve that. However, this positivity and feeling of certainty subsided shortly after graduating, and I now ask the question: *Why was that?* I loved my job, yet something was missing. I felt that I needed more and that I could be utilising my skills more. I felt I had more to give and that I wasn't being given the opportunity to fully express my potential.

At first, I thought it was the lack of referrals that was the problem, so I approached my dentist colleagues and offered my clinical remit to help relieve

their workload and improve patient access. I waited, yet nothing changed. After a while, I requested to work in more practices where I might better utilise my skills, and I was later dispersed between three.

Eventually, a colleague suggested that I change my role completely and become a dentist. This suggestion evoked an eagerness in me that prompted me to

research the idea further and upon doing so, I genuinely believed I'd found the answer I was looking for. If I wanted to do more, then I had to *become* more. But recognising the sacrifices this would require, I stopped to ask myself the following first:

'What scares me more: taking a risk and sacrificing finances, moving away, delaying having children - all to become happier as a dentist?

Author information

¹Savanna Joyce and Rachel Jackson are both dental students at the Institute of Dentistry in Aberdeen.

Or, remain where I am and accept an unhappy nine-to-five, only to potentially regret my decision 30 years from now?

Today, upon reflection, I feel saddened that I believed that these were my only two options. After deciding that the latter scared me more, my decision was made. I gave no further thought towards the long journey that I was about to embark upon until I began dental school. There, I was asked what had prompted me to apply to study dentistry. A perfectly valid question, yet one that stifled me completely. I instantly realised that my lack of understanding towards what I had felt as a dental therapist may have just inadvertently caused me to turn my life upside down - without the promise of anything improving.

'If I didn't understand what made me so unhappy as a therapist - why was I so sure that becoming a dentist would fix things? Had I just made a massive mistake? What on Earth had I just done?'

I turned to my classmate - Rachel Jackson - a fellow dental therapist herself. I hoped to gain some understanding from her and much to my relief, she understood completely because she was going through a similar thing.

'I had a job many would dream of, Savanna. I was working to my full remit, supported and valued, but searching for more and hoping dentistry was "IT", said Rachel.

Our discussion led us to recognise that we'd both made impactful decisions under the assumption that working our way 'up' was the only way forward! This led us to consider that career progression didn't necessarily need to take the form of a 'ladder', where movement occurs only in an upwards direction, but takes the form of a 'tree' instead - allowing more freedom for multi-lateral progression, with a supportive root system, branching interests and potential for personalised multi-faceted growth progression. This realisation helped me to recognise that quality patient care was in my roots and this was enough to convince me to stay in dental school.

However, I still felt that I'd lack absolute confirmation of being happier as a dentist until I fully understood why I was so unhappy as a dental therapist. Armed with this awareness, I sought to gain a deeper understanding and recognised that, to do this, I needed to accurately 'reflect'.

Reflection for enlightenment

The importance of reflective practice is already heavily integrated into the dental profession through the guidance of our regulator, taking the form of a personal development plan (PDP).

Reflection in our PDP aims to evaluate the impact our CPD activity has on helping us to

Fig. 1 Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. From Graham Gibbs' *Learning by doing*, 1988.

develop and improve the skills and knowledge required to meet the GDC's development outcomes.¹

A statement published in 2019 by the GDC, alongside eight other regulators, highlighted the importance and benefits of being a 'reflective practitioner'.² This statement focussed on how reflection can improve our services and patient care, but failed to emphasise how it can be

understanding of how *we feel* within our role as dental therapists and why we feel the way that we do. Reflection allows us to systematically work through the stages of evaluation, analysing and drawing our own conclusions about our feelings. This can ultimately help guide us to make the right decisions for ourselves, rather than simply jumping at an opportunity to change our careers entirely.

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utilised in other aspects of our work. Likewise, the current evidence available on clinical reflection seeks to mainly evaluate the impact it has on expanding our knowledge base and enhancing our competence - to help improve service outcomes.³

Consequently, reflection can offer more than helping us to improve our clinical practice. It also provides an opportunity to gain a deeper

I've learned that there are numerous 'models' that can be used for reflection and I've used Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Fig. 1) to reflect on my own experience. I realise now that by having not used a reflective model before, I had been overlooking key stages of the process which consequently, I believe led me to misunderstand my feelings completely. Through applying this reflective model to my situation, I realise now

that it wasn't 'fulfilment' I lacked as a dental therapist; it was a sense of *value within the team*. I don't know for certain what drove me to feel this way, but it could be connected to the fact that I had to explain and validate my role to others on a regular basis. I feel the lack of understanding to what I brought to the team led me to call in to question my worth as a professional. This prompted me to chase the delusion that I had to keep doing 'more' within my role to feel content.

Considering this new understanding, I now see the fundamental flaw with having only reflected *after* I had acted upon my feelings and returned to university:

'If a sense of value is what I sought, then becoming a dentist wasn't a valid action plan. I didn't need to become a dentist to gain value, I was already valuable, and all I had to do was regain a sense of that.'

This revelation triggered me to question: 'How many other dental therapists feel there is a lack of understanding and awareness to what we bring to the dental team? Could this be why some of us feel the need to become dentists?'

If we feel the need to seek validation

positive one. It's allowed me to feel very content with where I am today and confident that I can maintain this level of contentment throughout my career by applying the learning points I've gained through my experiences. I can, however, appreciate that others may find themselves having to make bigger sacrifices than I have and therefore, I feel a strong sense of obligation to share my experience with others.

As we approach a post-pandemic era, we have been gifted with new perspectives that may leave some wishing to leave the profession. But Rachel and I would ask that you first gain a deeper understanding of your feelings and the value you hold as an individual and as a professional. This understanding is imperative if you are to develop an action plan that has an accurate and valid direction.

'It's not sufficient to simply have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost.' *Graham Gibbs, 1988*

I hope that this article will serve as an example of the need for personal development that incorporates proper reflective practice.

'How many other dental therapists feel there is a lack of understanding and awareness to what we bring to the dental team?'

externally then this could be a sign that we in fact need to work on our own personal growth and mindset. Our value is not just held in what we do for a living. Our value is also in who we are as individuals.

Rachel suggested that the personal development plan (PDP) could be maximised and used as an opportunity to grow 'self' - as well as grow 'safety' and that every person has their own threshold of tolerance, willingness to sacrifice and interpretation of 'value'.

Rachel and I believe that mentorship, networking through associations and building trusted relationships with our dental teams and managers is vital to help gain perspective on what else is out there to learn. Find ways to progress: seek feedback on our strengths and weaknesses through an appraisal process, as this can help to create a sense of worth and set goals that keep us motivated and united as a team.

While today I can't overlook my sacrifices, I still consider my experience to have been a

References

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