The artist usually known as dental technician

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Associate dentist **Sharif Islam** turns the spotlight on a member of the dental team too often overlooked.

Another box arrives.

But this one isn't from an online retailer. It doesn't generate that giddy anticipation of discovering something brand new inside, pristine and wrapped. The Sellotape was strapped around it as an afterthought and the address scribbled on with such indifference it's a wonder the postal service could read it. The cardboard is creased, crumpled and paper thin, as though retrieved from a puddle after several days of immersion.

Nope. This one is from a dentist.

Inside is a set of dental impressions, apparently taken to enable the fabrication of a crown, hurriedly blanketed in some old newspaper. The headline features a scantily clad woman talking about alien abduction so one safely assumes it wasn't studied for CPD. Naturally the margins are indistinct from the gingiva, the practitioner evidently never thought or taught to use retraction cord. The opposing arch impression was ripped out before it had set and, typically, there's little instruction beyond 'Crown lower left 3'. It's actually the upper left 6 that has been prepared, but when you're looking at teeth all day long by way of your profession it must be easy to confuse a lower canine with an upper molar.

So, the technician will have to work some magic once again, which is fast becoming their job description. The dentist will take the credit when the crown is fitted perfectly, of course, but it will be the technician's hands that craft the custom-made jewel.

Amidst the melted globs of wax and solder a coffee mug, inadvertently scarred by errant

sandblasting, had found its place. Although the single most important item in the technician's lab, the mug hosts a coffee two hours cold with a dead fly floating in it. One likes to think it experienced a buzz in more ways than one before it died. It bore witness to a beautiful full denture being polished to a glistening lustre and layers of porcelain powder gingerly applied to a zirconia core. It must also have seen stress etching a furrow into the brow of the technician, whose steady hands and focused gaze are utterly unfazed by the volume of jobs piled high upon his station.

The technician's colleague sits behind them, her back to his. Despite their proximity to each other they barely speak all day, so engrossed are they in the intricacies of their work. She doesn't need to say much; her work speaks for itself. Enjoying no society whatsoever from her colleague her only collaboration with him is to preserve the silence, only breaking it if to do so would somehow improve it. Her life is not one of luxury or indulgence but consistent diligence and an almost obsessive-compulsive commitment to perfection.

The rewards here are a secondary objective. That's not why they do this. This is more than just a job.

This is art.

A dental technician has to make something. They have to sculpt it, shape it and polish it, and all from an impersonation of an impression taken by someone else. With every curve of every cusp, gently moulded into an almost sensuous form, one could easily forget they were looking at a tooth. And once fitted to the

prep, flush and smooth with no edges or ledges interrupting one's touch, the opposing model closes onto it like a jigsaw. Magic has been performed once again.

It is often surmised that to be an artist is to experience pain. Whether such a conjecture relates to the lack of gainful opportunities for artists of any kind, or whether it's a more existential observation, the dental technician will speak to its veracity. For they are often solitary or just a small band, trying to stay buoyant in a quagmire of price undercutting and corporate buyouts. The technician is an idealist, devoted to precision and quality, whose early confident composure is repeatedly routed throughout their career into a desultory stoop.

And yet...

Nobody else can do what they can do.

Their skillset was briefly sampled on the dental school syllabus in days long past but today it is elite. And like any elite service it should command a commensurate fee and timescale for its undertaking.

Their value to our profession is frequently overshadowed by the accolade and applause we shower upon our nurses, hygienists and other complementary staff. Working at another location they are often forgotten or overlooked. But they have just as much value to dentistry as the practitioners sending the prescriptions. They just happen to work outside the mouth. And as supernatural as their abilities can be, their work inevitably depends on the quality of the impressions we provide.

Hopefully, the next box we send out will be worthy of their calibre, and the work contained within worthy of the collective promise we make to our patients.

It is our dental technicians that ensure it's a promise we can keep.

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