

The DCP researcher

Author information

Abigail, from Leeds, is a dental therapist and also Hygiene & Therapy Research Manager at the Dental Translational Clinical Research Unit, University of Leeds.

In 2020 Hygiene & Therapy Research Manager Abigail Turner won an award in the Colgate Robin Davies DCP Awards to support her research into oral health inequalities in underserved communities. **Kate Quinlan** spoke to Abigail about her background in dentistry and involvement with research.

What originally attracted you to dentistry?

I think like a lot of people, I entered my twenties with very little idea of how to bring my interests together into a career. Dentistry ticked a lot of boxes for me because the skills you need to be a good clinician are so varied. I've always been really interested in the basic sciences, but knew I wanted day to day interaction with patients. Dentistry allows me to dig deep into biological science, whilst also being very hands-on and creative. In addition, we wear scrubs at work which are basically pyjamas - so that's a big plus!

How did you start out in dentistry?

My pathway into dentistry is a little bit unusual. When I left school I went to the University of York and studied Bioarchaeology. In my final year I was introduced to a group studying the ancient oral microbiome and ancient analysis of dental calculus; this sparked an interest in oral health. I took a couple of years out working before I decided to take the plunge and apply for dental therapy. My archaeology tutor was horrified that I am removing the calculus she wants to study!

How did this progress to your current role?

I was really lucky when I studied at Leeds to work closely with tutors who were passionate about dental research, and who really paved

the way for dental therapists to explore beyond traditional roles in practice. There are a lot of staff within the university that are champions of DCP research and are actively creating opportunities to develop our careers, which is incredibly exciting.

What does your current role entail?

I currently split my time between working in general practice and working for the University of Leeds. That way I get to stay hands-on working with patients, and then work more broadly within dental research. My day to day at the university is really varied; essentially I am delivering the clinical trials we are currently undertaking as a research team at Leeds.

What are you working on at the moment and what are your working hours?

I have the opportunity to work across a range of really interesting studies and trials. My main goal is to continue to develop my skills as a researcher and expose myself to as many areas of study as I can, to work towards an eventual PhD application. I am currently involved in work that focuses on improving child oral health, head and neck cancer and the links between oral and systemic health. Currently I work three days with the university and two days in practice.

What is dental translational clinical research?

The department I work within is called 'DenTCRU' (dental translational and clinical research unit). Headed up by Professor Sue

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Pavitt, we are a team of DCPs and wider researchers. Our work ranges from early phase studies to full clinical trials. I'm really lucky to work within an interdisciplinary team of specialists, and ultimately our work will always focus on ensuring any research we undertake is 'translated' from the academic to clinical practice, so our work can provide tangible patient benefits.

What do you enjoy about your work?

I'm really lucky that I get to work closely with people I really admire, and who have taken a real interest in my personal development. I really feel like I'm learning from the best, and I see my skills as a clinician and a researcher growing, which is really satisfying.

What was the research proposal that you entered into the Colgate Robin Davies DCP Awards?

Along with my colleagues Fiona Heffron and the lead of the project Professor Sue Pavitt, I applied for the Robin Davies award for our work with the project 'RAISED in Yorkshire'. This is a collaborative project which focuses on utilising role modelling and within this project we aim to improve sustainability, reach and effectiveness of oral health education in high need underserved communities. We work with local sixth formers to train them as oral health educators/champions; they then work with local primary schools to promote oral health. We know that driving research innovation from within communities and working collaboratively is the key to sustainable, effective programmes. The programme allows us to reduce oral health inequality in communities of high social deprivation and increase aspiration and opportunity to vulnerable young adults.

How did it feel to win an award?

It's really exciting, and a confidence boost to have your work supported and recognised. The team I work with have put a lot of effort into our development and pilot work, so it's great to see the project gain recognition.

How does the award support your research investigation?

Our initial pilot work shows some promising results, but we need to expand our testing to widen the programme to more schools to improve robustness. The award supports the expansion of the programme into more schools. I'm working with my team to develop partnerships with local school networks, to design and deliver the oral health educators' enrichment programme within local high schools and to support all organisational delivery within local primary schools. I am also responsible (in part) for the continued refinement of the evaluation process.

How is the research progressing? Has it been affected by the pandemic?

The pandemic has really deeply affected research in general, and we are sadly no exception. With our project relying on face to face contact within the school setting, and mixing between different year groups, we have had to apply for an extension to the original award deadline, with the hope that autumn term means we can resume data collection. As a wider group in collaboration with York and Sheffield University we have been using the year to develop the evaluation framework of the project, this has been a really useful exercise so when we are able to physically pick up the project again, it will be an improved version of our model.

The awards

Colgate and the Oral & Dental Research Trust offer awards for research conducted by dental care professionals (DCPs). The awards honour Professor Robin Davies' contribution to dental research.

Four awards are made on the basis of an application for support of investigations of clinical relevance, particularly in the field of preventive care. While the applicant must be a DCP, it is anticipated that a research team will be formed to include a mentor or supervisor with an established research record.

<http://odrt.org.uk/colgate-dcp-awards/>

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Do you plan to submit your research for possible publication?

Yes, when we are able to overcome the challenges of the pandemic and complete our data collection we will most certainly be compiling our evidence base from this, and previous work to publish.

What do you have planned next?

My eventual goal is to complete a PhD, but in order to be a strong candidate I need to tick a couple of things off my list, and develop my skills. I’m really lucky to have mentors around me who are supporting me through the process.

Would you encourage other DCPs to get involved with research?

I think it’s fair to say that allied health professionals have been historically shut out of research, but this is changing rapidly. More and more there are incredible opportunities for DCPs, so I expect over the coming years our career options will massively expand. It can be intimidating to find these opportunities but I would encourage you to get in touch and network with people that interest you.

What are your interests outside dentistry?

I suppose I have to say something more interesting than ‘binge watching *Line of Duty*’? I’m mad about travel and tennis, but in a year with no travel or tennis I’ve really enjoyed attempting Instagram inspired DIY, cooking and training a very energetic puppy.

Any exciting plans coming up?

I got a dog last year and I am very much a pathetic ‘dog mum’, so I basically spend most waking moments thinking about her. I



think like everyone, it’s the year of the British staycation, but that works out well for our dog who gets to come on all our trips now. I have a sister who lives in Dubai who I haven’t got to see in so long, I’m really hoping I get to see her at some point this year - fingers crossed!

Abi is pictured with husband Tom.

Editor’s note: This September BDJ Team will be DCP research-themed. If you would like to submit an article for inclusion in this issue, please email k.quinlan@nature.com.

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