



‘To get such an accolade is beyond amazing!’



In 2020 dental nurse Natalie Ofkants was named BDA Education Outstanding Radiography student, sharing the award with one other student. Natalie tells **Kate Quinlan** about her career to date and how she found the online course.

Natalie Ofkants, from Newbury in Berkshire, is a dental nurse and oral health educator, health and safety lead and has responsibilities for radiography and as a first aider at her practice.

Interview

Are you from Berkshire originally?

My father was in the army as I was growing up, so I moved around a lot all my life. I was born in Germany whilst my father was stationed there, but generally we moved every two or three years: I went to 13 schools in total. My final schooling and place where we settled before moving to Berkshire was Wareham in Dorset. I do think of Dorset as my original home.

What sort of practice do you work in?

I work in a private dental practice with four dentists and three hygienists. The dentists carry out general dentistry and we also have those with specialisms in implantology, oral surgery,

endodontics, and facial aesthetics.

Presently I work three days a week, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, however the nursing team fill in for others on holidays and sickness as both dental nurses and receptionists.

How did you get into dentistry?

When I was taking my A-levels in secondary school, I wanted to look for employment, so applied for what was then a ‘Dental Surgery Assistant’ role in my home town of Wareham, Dorset. I actually started working in a little two-dentist practice before I had completed my A-levels, learning the role and revising side by side. Prior to this I had not considered dentistry as a profession; I was looking to go into the police force, and was too young when I left school to apply. I did eventually join the police, but dental nursing had seeped into my blood a little, and I was very happy to return to it a few years later.

What appealed to you about working in dentistry?

I am very much a people person, and love

working as part of a team, but also with responsibility to work under my own initiative. Dental nursing gives me all of that.

Can you outline your career history to date?

When I started dental nursing at the age of 18 in 1985 in Wareham, it was for a lovely married couple of dentists, Mr and Mrs Chant. I worked with Mr Chant doing a broad range of dental surgery and also casting up plaster models for denture work or orthodontics. I worked for him until 1987 when I joined the MOD Police, and was stationed at Greenham Common, Newbury.

I was a uniformed police officer for five years, with a six-month position on CID. I enjoyed my time in the police force, and married my husband. Coincidentally, we had been in the same class at the police training school, so that must have been fate, as we ended up being sent to the same station and on the same police section, working the same hours.

We had our first child in 1993. I couldn’t see myself doing such long shifts with a small baby, and also my husband and I would have had to

do opposite shifts to look after him - meaning we wouldn't see each other at all - so I took a five-year career break from the police. However, after a year, I felt like I still wanted to do some work and saw that a local dental practice in Thatcham, within walking distance of my home, was looking for a dental nurse. I applied and worked part time for Mr Carter, another general dentist, who also did orthodontics and denture work. Whilst working for Mr Carter, in 1998 I completed my NEBDN qualification in dental nursing, achieving a merit distinction.

I then followed this with taking my Oral Health Education (OHE) qualification, receiving a distinction, and was awarded the Stafford Miller award for OHE in 1999.

Mr Carter retired and the practice was sold to Dr Rutland, who encouraged me to be the practice oral health educator, and I had my own appointment book of patients.

I was asked by another NEBDN trainer if I would be interested in teaching dental nursing with her, so to facilitate this, I took a qualification in Further Adult Education and commenced supporting and teaching NEBDN for a few years in the evenings at Newbury College.

By this time, I had had another two children, so time had to be managed very efficiently!

In 2000, I saw a job advertised in our local paper for a School Healthy Hearts Consultant, a role funded by Bayer in conjunction with the west Berkshire Local Education Authority. The role was for a qualified teacher. I applied out of interest, not thinking I would be considered, so was surprised when I was invited for an interview. Deciding that it would be good interview practice, I prepared a presentation and went to the interview, with schemes of work, lesson plans and such like. I was very surprised when I was given the role, covering all schools across West Berkshire, a part time role to fit around my children. This role also enabled me to add in oral health education as part of the programme. After a couple of years, I was supported in and accepted to also take on the role of School Drug Adviser, and I worked with the NHS stop smoking service, providing stop smoking services to pupils in schools. I also developed an initiative with the British Heart Foundation and local paramedics to bring emergency life support training and equipment into schools; this was very successful and I am pleased to say that whilst I worked in the initiative the majority of West Berkshire schools received funding and equipment for developing emergency life support training in schools. I also completed first responder training with Berkshire paramedics.

I worked in education for 14 years. It had very much become a full-time job, and there came a time when funding for education consultants was being cut. The secondary schools I was working with very kindly funded me themselves part-time for a further three years, but eventually all good things come to an end.

I was also at a time in my life when I wanted to work fewer hours again, and in 2013 Wash Common Dental Practice was looking for a part-time qualified dental nurse. I applied and have been there ever since.

Have you continued working during the pandemic?

Our practice initially closed in March 2020 as the first lockdown descended. The practice principal worked very hard toward getting the practice ready to be reopened as soon as possible, with all PPE and safety measures in place. We then started back at work in June 2020, so apart from a short period on furlough, we have been working the majority of the pandemic.

Why did you decide to study the BDA Radiography course?

My practice principal, Dr Seepaul Singh, was very keen for me to take the course. Three nurses at our practice had taken it the year before and one of those also received the top score, like me - so two from one practice is not bad going.

What did you think of the course?

I really enjoyed the course. I found it well designed, user friendly and easy to navigate. Some areas were tough for me, not having a physics brain, but I worked through it on my own at home. If I had any questions, concerns or even IT issues, the staff were very responsive to my emailed questions.

Did it require a lot of study time?

Most definitely, especially as I was working on it alone. I spent many hours working at night and on weekends, going back over modules and making notes for myself, and I found the course notes provided excellent, enabling me to add to the margins and cross reference other modules.

How did it feel to achieve the joint-top marks and be awarded the BDA Education Outstanding Radiography student of 2020?

Surreal actually! I knew I had passed, obviously, and with a good grade, so was ecstatic about that, but to get such an accolade is beyond

amazing! I thought 'Not bad for an old lady!'

How have you used your dental radiography qualification since completing the course?

I regularly take the OPGs and, if needed to, intraoral radiographs for any dentist requiring them. I have also been made the radiography lead for the practice, and am developing an online radiography file, reviewing and developing policies, and will soon be completing the radiography audits for the practice.

Has it benefitted your career?

It has given me more work to do! But, of course yes, it's always good to further your knowledge and skill set with additional occupational qualifications.

Would you recommend the course to other dental nurses?

Certainly and I have encouraged newer colleagues to the practice to take the course. I have also advocated the course on Facebook forums for dental nurses.

Do you have any further career plans?

I enjoy studying and would very much like to continue to do so. I have an interest in oral cancers and the effects of smoking; this was the subject of my OHE project back in 1999, so I would like to develop this further.

What are your plans for this summer?

We usually go every year to Cyprus for the summer holidays, as my parents have retired out there, but this year we will staycation in the UK. My eldest son lives in Manchester and we have not really seen him and his partner for a year, so it would be nice to visit them - pandemic permitting - and we will take breaks to my beloved Dorset and the coast when we can.

What do you like to do outside work?

I am an avid reader and also like to craft, so keep myself pretty busy. Our trips to Dorset are fossil hunting expeditions - we enjoy a good walk along the beach finding treasures to bring home. My other two children still live at home with us, so it's something we can do as a family too.

For more information on the BDA's Radiography course, visit <https://bda.org/dcps>.

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