



'Continuous learning is contagious'

Preetee Hylton, 33, is a restorative/implant dental nurse and safeguarding lead at the No.8 Partnership dental practice in Chelsea, London, and an associate examiner for NEBDN. Preetee holds the National Certificate in Dental Nursing (2010), an Education Certificate in Dental Radiography (2013) and PTLS (Level 3). She is originally from a small village called Bois Cheri in Mauritius. She has two daughters aged ten and 13, from her previous marriage, and is currently looking forward to a new chapter with her 'other half', in their soon-to-be home.

My mornings start before sunrise. I wake up at 05:30 on working days and at 7-ish on others – my body clock is loyal to these times. I live in East London but will be moving to Hertfordshire soon.

Early mornings mean that I do not have anything to eat for breakfast on working days but cannot survive without a good cup of coffee. I do tend to have a mid-morning breakfast bar or a muffin, if I manage to catch a break in between patients. A rather unhealthy routine and I would not encourage anyone else to do this; I have a healthier (and fuller) breakfast on weekends. As I work unusual hours, sometimes I get home at 17:00, 19:00 or 20:00, but me moving out of London

will add 30 minutes to that. I will be getting home at 21:00 on Mondays in the very near future – this will have me eating my dinner at work or on the train, followed by a shower and immediately falling asleep, when I get home.

I take the Underground to work (I do not drive) - it is a brilliant way to travel in London. According to Google, my workplace is 15 miles from where I currently live, but this will increase to 32 miles when I move next year – an extensive body clock upgrade will be required. I work unusual hours at the No8 Partnership; Mondays are the most challenging as I start my shift at 07:45 and finish at 19:15. Other days are easier, starting at the same time but finishing at 18:00 or mid-afternoon – these vary according to our patients' needs. My clinician and I are happy to work beyond our usual hours and at times, on our occasional Tuesdays off, to provide more flexibility to our patients.

I am a restorative/implant dental nurse; I work alongside John Good, who is a specialist prosthodontist and an ITI (International Team for Implantology) Fellow. We are both safeguarding leads in the practice. My safeguarding role requires me to keep an eye on any updates in the subject – having a keen interest in mental health helps. John's passion for dentistry and enthusiasm to learn new ways to enhance his skills (and mine) reflects my approach to the profession - continuous learning is contagious. I enjoy walking into the practice in the morning and both of us going through our day list. I love the fact that we get to find solutions to oral health/dental issues. I enjoy learning about our patients' individual journey with us and it delights me to be part of it. I have always found delegating tasks to be challenging. I am described as conscientious and yet 'full on'. I am learning to delegate, with support from my clinician, and proud to say I am no longer uncomfortable seeking assistance from my colleagues on busy days.

Our dental team consists of four prosthodontists and one periodontist, who also practise general dentistry. We have two part-time orthodontists, three hygienists, six dental nurses and five part-time secretaries. We have one practice manager and an accounts manager. We tend to see a wide variety of patients, mostly families who have been coming to us for years – after all, the practice has existed since 1926. My surgery is situated on the ground floor (with bay windows overlooking the communal garden), therefore we get to know most of our elderly

patients, who may find it challenging to brave the stairs; it might be safe to say that we are much involved in geriatric dentistry, and I have discovered that age is merely a number. I take great pleasure in listening to their inspiring stories about their life experiences and adventures.

We are a great team at the No8 Partnership. During summer, my colleagues and I like to enjoy our lunchtime in the garden and this gives us a chance to spend some time with the two tortoises, Fiona and Lady Penelope (yes, we do have them in our garden and they are the main attraction of our practice). During winter, we all enjoy the comfortable warmth of the staff room, with hot chocolates. We care about one another and have a great laugh – mostly on non-dentistry related subjects.

I completed my post-certification in dental radiography and my PTLLS [Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector], whilst I was still at that practice. I also had the opportunity to mentor student dental nurses and assist them in their career progression. After approximately three years, I felt that I had outgrown the practice and ended up looking for other opportunities to suit my skills and my passion for dentistry.

I proceeded to work as a locum dental nurse all over London for 3–4 months, which is how I was introduced to the No.8 Partnership. I have now been there for over five years (the longest I have been in a practice). I have also taught general dental nursing at the Dental Nursing Academy for about six years; I am currently on a teaching break and would like to use this

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My journey in dentistry started when my cousin introduced me to dental nursing. I had never heard of a dental nurse before, and I was curious – I had a vague idea of the job role itself as I had read about it but needed more in-depth knowledge. I very much enjoyed my course because I had a brilliant tutor – he believed in me and encouraged me to be and do my very best. No one else in my family works in dentistry, but my mother has worked in a hospital since I was a child, first as a ward attendant; she recently qualified as a healthcare attendant in Mauritius and seems to have immersed herself in her new role. I used to spend my school holidays in the hospital she worked in (still does); accompanying my mum to her workplace propelled my interest and curiosity in medicine, and I loved reading on how the human body works - I wanted to be a midwife or a gynaecologist or a teacher.

After my training and subsequently qualifying as a dental nurse, I went on maternity leave. I then started as a general dental nurse/receptionist in an NHS practice in East London. I was promoted to lead nurse/infection control lead and was then offered a practice manager role, which came with its challenges but taught me the meaning of leadership and discipline in the profession.

time to improve my teaching skills. Two years ago, I was fortunate enough to become an associate examiner for the NEBDN [National Examining Board for Dental Nurses]. Last year, I was contacted to join the ITI Dental Nurses committee (UK and Ireland section) and subsequently, started a role as the study club co-director. Last year, the ITI leadership team made the decision to incorporate dental nurses and dental hygienists and therapists in the organisation. In my role as one of the four committee members for the dental nurses' section and the nurses' study club co-director, we recently organised the very first face-to-face dental nurses meeting as part of the ITI Congress, which took place in Edinburgh on 1 October this year. We had a highly successful day, with 83 delegates attending our lectures and practical hands-on sessions.

I was one of the first people to embark on Victoria Wilson's [the creator and director of the Smile Revolution podcast] 'how to launch an oral health promotion project/business' course, which was sponsored by Philips last year and my project is about promoting prenatal oral health and ensuring that families learn the importance of good oral health prior to, during and after pregnancy. My project, 'Mother of Molars' has been a slow start, but I am currently working on it. During my



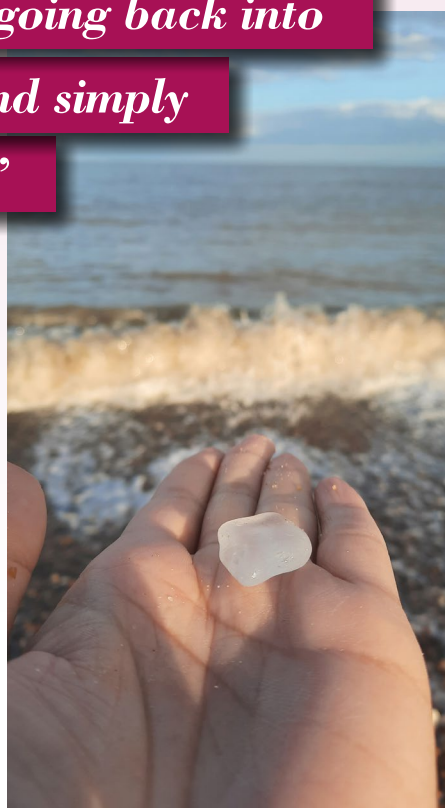
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journey with Victoria, I have had the privilege to get to know other dental care professionals passionate about improving oral health in the community. I believe I do overshare and over-educate (is that even a thing?) when it comes to oral and dental health. My other half does not seem to have the patience for my ramblings (even though he has played a huge role in most of my achievements in dentistry), and I did have him start using a water flosser for interdental cleaning as neither floss nor interdental brushes proved to be useful (romantic date ideas right here!).

I am also on the editorial board for the *Dental Nursing* journal. I enjoy sharing my views but what thrills me the most is finding dental nurses to interview. Ensuring dental nurses receive the recognition they much deserve is what drives me to write. I was also honoured to receive the Best Dental Nurse Award at the Diamond Dental Staff Recognition Awards last year and I am a finalist at the Dentistry Awards this year, for Best Dental Nurse (South of England).

When the COVID-19 pandemic began my practice was closed for about 9–10 weeks, during which I used my time at home to do more CPD hours and short courses and created @thelondondentalnurse on Instagram



as my professional social media profile. Going back to work was daunting and wearing FFP3 respirators and more extensive PPE, as well as implementing new cross-infection control protocols, was challenging. It was difficult to breathe through our masks and respirators, which resulted in rather unpleasant headaches and dehydration for months. The pandemic did not dampen my enthusiasm for dental nursing for one second; I looked forward to going back into dentistry and simply doing

what I love. I am very satisfied with my working conditions as a dental nurse but not at all pleased about the overall general working conditions and wages in dental nursing. Recruiting dental nurses is extremely difficult now – the hourly pay is certainly a driving factor, and most nurses feel that they are not supported, or even respected, by their employers and managers. Some of us have made it our mission to support dental nurses who feel stuck and wish to move forward in their dental nursing career; I am supremely proud of this extraordinary support network which has emerged.

Outside work, I am an NHS check-in-and-chat volunteer – this was launched during the first lockdown, to ensure that remote support is provided to the vulnerable. I am also on the Samaritans Lived Experience Panel and Insight Panel – I have a keen interest in mental health due to my own challenges in the past. This is my way to give something back after the extensive support I received from family, friends, colleagues and mental health organisations. I also attended a seminar to become a coastal guardian for the northeast Kent beaches – the plan is to organise and participate in beach cleans next year. I love collecting sea-glass; I like the idea of glass that has been disposed of as rubbish being polished by natural elements and coming back as something more valuable. I enjoy nature photography (I only use my phone) – I am told that I have a 'good eye'.

On a more personal note, weekends are mainly for cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping. I do enjoy long walks in the woods and on the beach with my family and occasionally catching up with friends over lunch/dinner; nothing is better than spending quality time with loved ones – especially when it comes to chatting to my mum on the phone during my free time. If I am on my own, I enjoy a good fantasy or Sci-Fi book.

The main event that I am looking forward to is starting a new chapter, in our new home, with my other half, who has been my closest friend, my biggest fan and my rock for the past six years. I feel that I have spent so many of my years dedicating my time to work and I would love to start enjoying some much-deserved family time and work towards a healthy work/personal life balance; and hopefully, add a kitten to our family!

Interview by Kate Quinlan

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