Advancing Dental Care

– Utilising the dental therapist workforce to optimise patient outcomes

By **Lorena Pivoda**¹ and **Ewen McColl**¹

Introduction

The recent publication of Health Education England's (HEE) Advancing Dental Care Review highlighted the underutilisation of dental therapists in general dental practice:

- 'HEE wants to create opportunities across each of its regions to optimise the skills of dental therapists and facilitate the profession to undertake more simple dental treatments. The London Economics study found that potential net economic benefits and, consequently, service benefits would be associated with a greater flexibility in the use of skill mix by creating an environment where dental therapists could undertake more Band 1 and simple Band 2 treatments, which would free up dentists to undertake more complex treatments.'
- 'They frequently find themselves unable to exploit their full Scope of Practice – often for historic or contractual reasons.'

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The potential for dentists – particularly in primary care – to share workload with DCPs in line with their Scope of Practice and experience is greatly under-utilised. This opens opportunities for securing an adaptive workforce, particularly in rural and coastal areas, where dental access is a challenge.¹

- 'One of the consistent issues identified by patient engagement events was a lack of understanding among patients of the roles of the whole dental workforce, which has contributed to the situation.'¹

Aims and objectives

In May 2013, the General Dental Council (GDC) clarified the Scope of Practice for members of the dental team including dental therapists. This guidance is a way of describing what individual team members are trained and competent to do in practising their profession. It describes the knowledge, skills, and experience team members can utilise to practise safely and effectively in the best interests of patients² (Table 1).

A paper published by Marshall in *BDJ Team*³ highlighted some of the misconceptions around the role of dental therapists and the treatments they can

provide. This may impact on full utilisation of dental therapists when evidence suggests a significant contribution to patient care could be made if utilised appropriately. A 2007 study described the proportion and volume of work undertaken in primary dental care that could be delegated to dental hygienists and therapists.⁴

By optimising the full Scope of Practice of dental therapists, this would allow dentists to focus on more complex treatments unique to their scope such as endodontics or fixed prosthodontics.

The integration of the Dental Therapy and Bachelor of Dental Surgery courses at the University of Plymouth,⁵ Peninsula Dental School has ensured team members are fully cognisant of other team members' scope with students encouraged to share care in order to optimise outcomes for patients.

The following cases highlight the care provided by an undergraduate dental therapy student and in highlighting this, we hope to encourage utilisation of dental therapists in general dental practice as recommended in Advancing Dental Care.

In both cases presented in Figures 1 and 2 the dental therapy student was responsible for all aspects of primary disease control - dental caries

Table 1 Scope of practice

Dental care professional Primary skills listed by GDC	Dental hygienist	Dental therapist	Dentist
Obtain a detailed dental history from patients and evaluate their medical history	✓	✓	✓
Carry out a clinical examination within their competence	✓	✓	✓
Complete periodontal examination, charting, use indices to screen and monitor periodontal disease	✓	✓	✓
Diagnose and treatment plan within their competence	✓	✓	✓
Prescribe radiographs	✓	✓	✓
Take, process, and interpret various film views used in general dental practice	✓	✓	✓
Plan the delivery of care for patients	✓	✓	✓
Give appropriate patient advice	✓	✓	✓
Provide preventive oral care to patients and liaise with dentists over the treatment of caries, periodontal disease and tooth wear	✓	✓	✓
Undertake supragingival and subgingival scaling and root surface debridement using manual and powered instruments	✓	✓	✓
Use appropriate anti-microbial therapy to manage plaque related diseases	✓	✓	✓
Adjust restored surfaces in relation to periodontal treatment	✓	✓	✓
Apply topical treatments and fissure sealants	✓	✓	✓
Give patients advice on how to stop smoking	✓	✓	✓
Take intra and extra-oral photographs	✓	✓	✓
Give infiltration and inferior dental block analgesia	✓	✓	✓
Place temporary dressings and re-cement crowns with temp. Cement	✓	✓	✓
Place rubber dam	✓	✓	✓
Take impressions	✓	✓	✓
Care of implants and treatment of peri-implant tissues	✓	✓	✓
Identify anatomical features, recognise abnormalities, and interpret common pathology	✓	✓	✓
Carry out oral cancer screening	✓	✓	✓
If necessary, refer patients to other healthcare professionals	✓	✓	✓
Keep full, accurate and contemporaneous patient records	✓	✓	✓
If working on prescription, vary the detail but not the direction of the prescription according to patient needs. For example, the number of surfaces to be restored or The material to be used.	✓	✓	N/A
Carry out direct restorations on primary And secondary teeth	✗	✓	✓
Carry out pulpotomies on primary teeth	✗	✓	✓
Extract primary teeth	✗	✓	✓
Place pre-formed crowns on primary teeth	✗	✓	✓
Prepare comprehensive treatment plans	✗	✗	✓
Prescribe and provide endodontic treatment on adult teeth	✗	✗	✓
Prescribe and provide fixed orthodontic treatment	✗	✗	✓
Prescribe and provide fixed and removable prostheses	✗	✗	✓
Carry out oral surgery, periodontal surgery	✗	✗	✓
Extract permanent teeth	✗	✗	✓
Prescribe and provide crowns and bridges	✗	✗	✓
Provide conscious sedation	✗	✗	✓
Carry out treatment on patients who are under general anaesthesia	✗	✗	✓

Fig. 1 Replacement of a failing composite

Fig. 2 Composite restorations UR2, UR1, UL1, UL2

Conclusions

Dental therapists have a wide skill set often underutilised in practice. Working to their full scope they will not only complement the work of other team members but optimise outcomes for patients, whilst ensuring dentists are free to focus on areas unique to their scope.

References

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'Working to their full scope [dental therapists] will not only complement the work of other team members but optimise outcomes for patients, whilst ensuring dentists are free to focus on areas unique to their scope.'

and periodontal disease, in line with FGDP/ CGDent *Standards in dentistry*.⁶ Following the dental therapy student's completion of treatment, the dental student progressed the case to completion by working on areas unique to the dentist's scope. This improved the outcome for the patient both clinically and also reduced the time frames to completion by working as a team. Similar utilisation would have similar outcomes in practice.

Whilst this case was completed under supervision it illustrates the skill set of dental therapists and the outstanding aesthetic outcome achieved for these patients. The initial hard tissue examination along with the soft tissue, the health of the gingivae and radiographic image were completed by the dental therapy student under supervision. The radiographs were taken, processed and interpreted by the dental therapist and subsequently reported by the dentist.

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