



In July the British Fluoridation Society (BFS) appointed dental care professionals (DCPs) **Sharon Walker** and **Sakina Needham** to its Executive Committee. We spoke to Sharon and Sakina to find out more about their backgrounds and the work of the BFS.



Sharon Walker has worked in dentistry for more than 30 years, starting her career as a dental nurse in general practice and going on to work with the Community Dental Service and leading its Oral Health Improvement Team. She chaired the National Oral Health Promotion Group (NOHPG) from 2013 to 2016 and has a keen interest in dental public health. She completed a Master's degree in health and social care in 2020 and continues to be an active advocate for oral health and reducing inequalities within the Bradford and Airedale District.

Interview

Where are you from originally?

Bradford, West Yorkshire.

How did you first get into dentistry?

I was initially going to join the RAF but had a change of heart, stayed in Bradford and joined a local general dental practice; as the saying goes 'I never looked back'.

What dental qualifications do you have?

My National Examining Board of Dental Nurses (NEBDN) dental nursing qualification; NEBDN Oral Health Education; and a Certificate in Dental Radiography from Leeds College of Health.

Can you summarise your career?

A long, rewarding and varied career: every day is different! I find Bradford such a rewarding city to work in. I feel very lucky to be part of the Bradford Community Dental Service; we are always striving to deliver the best possible care for our patients.

How did you get into teaching?

A big part of my role at the start of my oral health career was teaching. I was fortunate

to be supported to complete the Certificate in FE, Teaching qualification, City & Guilds. This has enabled me to deliver oral health to health care professionals including dental nurses, parents and children.

Why did you decide to study for a Master's degree in health and social care?

Completing a Master's degree had always been an aspiration of mine; I wanted to widen my knowledge around social care and the wider aspects of health, not just a dental focus. There are many other health determinants that impact on oral health. The completion of my Master's degree has given me a confidence to aim high. My graduation day was one of the proudest days of my career.

What impact did your studies have on your career?

So many. It has given me the confidence to grow outside my role and I have become involved with the British Fluoridation Society (BFS). It has provided me with the skills to write many papers to gain further funding in Bradford to deliver more oral health initiatives.

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'I think we are finding that dental nurses are becoming more widely represented and they are finding a strong voice. They have such an important role to play – often they are the ones fielding questions.'

How long have you been involved with the BFS?

Three years. The BFS are a very supportive, passionate and committed group of professionals.

How did it feel to be appointed to the BFS Executive Committee?

Delighted and I'm really looking forward to being part of this next water fluoridation journey.

What do you hope to achieve as part of the Committee?

Represent all areas of the dental group and help support the committee to raise the profile of water fluoridation.

Do you think water fluoridation would have a significant impact on your region of the UK?

Absolutely – but not just the Yorkshire and Humber region – all other areas that are not fluoridated. Water fluoridation is an effective public health intervention for reducing the prevalence of tooth decay and improving oral health inequalities across the UK for all ages.

Do you think more dental nurses should support the water fluoridation agenda?

I think we are finding that dental nurses are becoming more widely represented and they are finding a strong voice. They have such an important role to play – often they are the ones fielding questions. I do think we need to think wider than dental nurses and support dental receptionists and practice managers too. Together we can all play a part.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I love to travel, walk in the Yorkshire Dales and play netball.

Sakina Needham has been a registered DCP for 15 years, where she has expanded her scope of practice in private, NHS, community and voluntary settings mostly in the Lincolnshire area. Throughout her career, she has developed a passion for educating and supporting children and their parents on their journey to better oral health.

Interview

Where are you from originally?

I currently reside in Cambridgeshire but grew up on the South East Coast and have spent much of my career in Lincolnshire.

How did you first get into dentistry?

I took a summer job as a dental nurse by chance in 2006 and learned that the GDC were introducing registration for DCPs. I found it a very tricky decision as I wasn't yet sure what I wanted to do with my future, but I enjoyed the role and was learning so many unexpected things about oral health care and the community that I decided to stay and enrol on a dental nursing course.

What qualifications do you have?

In 2008 I gained my City and Guilds level 3 Diploma in Dental and Oral Health Nursing. I went on to obtain Oral Health Education, Dental Radiography, Oral and IV Sedation along with many extended duties including suture removal, impression taking and fluoride application.

Can you summarise your career in dentistry?

During my time in dentistry I have been lucky enough to experience many roles across NHS, private, and community settings both in independent practices and as part of corporate organisations. I have taken great pride in developing my skills in compliance, management, mentoring, safeguarding, and infection control in lead roles. I am

currently teaching the level 3 Apprenticeship in Dental Nursing, and the Dental Practice Management ILM qualification and am hoping to be involved in developing and starting a fluoride application course soon.

Were the pandemic lockdowns frustrating for you in terms of oral health education?

In 2020 by the time the pandemic resulted in lockdowns I had started regularly holding community OHI sessions in day nurseries, schools and local parent and children's groups. I found it very difficult to stop these so I started holding them online via zoom. I was so impressed with the turnout and how well



parents and children engaged – I think it was a nice break for many from maths sessions set by their schools! I learned so much about the struggles families were facing with diet and good health and wellbeing and so felt hopeful that these online sessions would make a difference.

When and how did you first become a tutor?

In 2016 I had my second child and found it tricky to manage childcare and being available for my team. I decided to try something different. I was so thrilled to be given a position as a trainee assessor with a local college in the business department – something my business studies A* GCSE came in handy for. This was completely out of my comfort zone. The college workplace was so much less rigid than the dental practice but I learned how to bring my skills and experience into the role, teaching and assessing business administrators in many different sectors (including one student in a food factory which was impressive, I thought). My dental nursing qualifications were well suited for teaching the medical pathway that provided medical secretaries with their AMSPAR qualifications too. After a while, the college introduced the dental nursing apprenticeship in which I played a key role in application, marketing, developing, and teaching.

'To have had my passion and eagerness recognised positively by those who have built this society is something that will stay with me for the rest of my career and I cannot thank the BFS enough.'

What does your working week look like at the moment?

In 2021 I moved to an online training academy as I was eager to expand my skills specifically for dental staff. Currently my working week involves holding support sessions remotely for my students who are putting together their portfolios of evidence including support with assignments, simulation activities and practical competencies to develop their skills and knowledge, preparing them to become confident and competent dental nurses. I spend 1–2 days a week travelling around my local area visiting learners in their workplaces to carry out observations and any time in between is spent being involved in team meetings and training to ensure I am up to date with current practice and requirements. I like to try and take on locum shifts as a dental nurse too to make sure I can maintain my practical skills.

How long have you been involved with the BFS?

I have always been an ardent supporter of fluoridation and have found a deep interest in understanding why water fluoridation isn't more widely available. I came across a CPD event held by the BFS in October 2021 and learned so much about the Health and Care Bill¹ and the effort it has taken the BFS in their journey. Since then I have been developing my interest in the Society. I became a member very soon after and have been incredibly humbled by the support and encouragement I have received from key members.

How did it feel to be appointed to the Executive Committee?

To have been appointed to the Executive Committee has been one of the most incredible experiences of my career. To have had my passion and eagerness recognised positively by those who have built this Society is something that will stay with me for the rest of my career and I cannot thank the BFS enough.

What do you hope to achieve as part of the Committee?

As part of the Committee I hope to achieve wider interest from fellow DCPs. I strongly believe that our DCPs are well placed in communities and can help the communities they work in understand the benefits of fluoridated water. I believe in modern dentistry where technology is leading the way, cosmetic and high end dentistry can be more appealing to aspiring dental professionals and so I would like to be able to continue to support the BFS' growth.

Do you think more DCPs should support the water fluoridation agenda?

Yes. In my experience as a DCP and as a parent I have found I have used my scope of practice in community and social settings with more impact than in the dental setting. Many young people often feel unworthy of a clinician's time and, therefore, DCPs are so very important in the water fluoridation agenda – to encourage support of the agenda.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I'm a busy mum of two children so my spare time is usually spent letting my hair down with dolls and nerf guns! We love to explore the countryside and climb small mountains and our favourite weekend away is at a theme park. When I have time for myself I love reading crime novels.

Reference

1. Department of Health & Social Care. Health and Care Bill: water fluoridation. Updated 10 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-and-care-bill-factsheets/health-and-care-bill-water-fluoridation> (accessed September 2022).

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