



‘I have never woken up and not wanted to go to work’

Helen Bullingham, 44, is Oral Health Promotion Team Lead, Special Care Dentistry, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust in Brighton. Helen loves her job and shares a glimpse into her working day.

I usually get up at 6:30 am. I live in a small village just outside of Horsham, West Sussex – I have always lived here (I never left). For breakfast I have Weetabix and a very strong tea. I sit on the sofa in my kitchen and tend to share the last bit of breakfast with the dog.

I have been married to Matt for 17 years and we have two children, Charlotte who is 17 and Rowan, 14.

I drive to work which is about 45 minutes

away. I work 7.5 hours a day, four days a week (flexi).

I am a very hands-on team lead: I love the coalface work of chatting to people; I manage the day-to-day diary, KPIs [key performance indicators]; meet with the commissioners; order stock; ensure we keep up to date with the latest dental news; update our teams of clinics; meet with hostel managers and carry out care home training. We also do the annual British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry (BASCD)

epidemiology study.

We see a huge array of client groups; we don't particularly organise it a certain way – we book in the groups where we have availability.

I have been in post as team lead just under a year but have worked in the oral health promotion team for coming up 20 years. I was originally a dental nurse and still like to keep my hand in; I love the clinical side of working with our special needs patients. I also assist with the general anaesthetic list that we run at

the Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital here in Brighton.

At school I wanted to study criminology and join the Police. However, I took a short-term post on the reception desk of my local dental practice before I was due to go to university. I was asked if I'd like to try dental nursing, and I loved it.

I completed my National Diploma in Dental Nursing in 1998 and a certificate in Oral Health Promotion two years later. I worked in the first dental practice for five years, mostly NHS, then moved to a private practice for two years, and then I saw an advert for an oral health promoter and I'm still here.

In my role I love chatting to people – my husband says I will chat to anyone about anything! Which is actually a great tool – we see a lot of very vulnerable people and I can sometimes talk to them for half an hour about all sorts until we get onto teeth –that helps to gain their trust. I enjoy going out and about.



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The one thing I didn't like about clinic work was being trapped between four walls.

We train a lot of care staff to look after their clients' teeth – sometimes they just don't want to get involved, they don't like to brush someone else's teeth or just don't see the point. It's rare, but it happens, which is a more challenging part of our work in oral health promotion.

Helen's advice for a dental nurse who would like to get more involved with oral health promotion

My interest started with a blank wall in reception. I would have a different oral health message every month. Get on an oral health education course and try to offer a small piece of oral health advice to every patient that you see. The more experience you have, the more your confidence will grow.

In my team, there is one other oral health promoter, Lucy; her role is very similar to mine, and we have admin support from Debbie.

Our primary target groups are the homeless, travellers, people with additional needs, substance/alcohol misuse patients, elderly patients at day centres, children's centre nurseries, health visitors and school nurses. We supply toothbrushing packs for food banks and for refugee centres too.

For lunch, I like to try and have a sandwich with the rest of my dental colleagues as it's nice to keep in touch with them – oh and I often have a sneaky Kit Kat – but I do ensure I keep sugar to mealtimes.

It's often a jam-packed day and it is never dull; no two days are the same.

I usually get home at 5:15 pm. Outside work I like to bake, walk my dog and at the moment my daughter and I are in our village panto. I am the sugar plum fairy – I intend to keep the costume to remodel as a tooth fairy.

Weekends are usually at the side of a football pitch with my son or shopping with



my daughter. We also like to eat out as a family when we can.

I'm careful with my family's oral health regimes, of course (to a degree). The only dental treatment my children have had is orthodontics. My husband is the chocoholic in our house – he is nagged regularly.

I usually go to bed about 10 pm.

This year we are visiting a family friend in Toronto in May and going to Boston whilst we are in the area.

I plan to carry on in the same workplace until I retire. I would absolutely recommend my career path to others. If you enjoy meeting people and are passionate about oral health improvement this is the job for you. I have never woken up and not wanted to go to work.

Interview by Kate Quinlan

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