

# *'I have made myself a career and carved it out in my own way'*



**Donna Bridger** is a Senior Dental Nurse with Extended duties in Education & Training at Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust and works as an Examiner and Subject

Matter Expert for NEBDN. In this article Donna describes her career in dental nursing and how she found her second calling as a teacher!

**D**ental nursing was never my original plan. Neither was teaching. As a teenager, my career plan was to be a marine archaeologist. The only problem was that I was no good at history or remembering dates, which is quite important in archaeology. I then looked into a career in the Police Force, but back then there was a minimum height restriction and lo and behold, I was too short. So, I had a conundrum of what to do when picking work experience. At this point, work experience placements were thin on the ground, so I went on the only placement left, at a local dental surgery.

That week's work experience was thoroughly enjoyed and set me on the path

to a career in dentistry. After leaving school, I found myself a job as a dental nurse, put myself through college and qualified as a dental nurse in 1999. I would have qualified the year before had I not failed my exam. Nerves got the better of me on that occasion and I dropped a brand new pot of powder on the floor! It caused chaos – broken glass everywhere – I was in tears and unable to answer the questions I was being asked.

I worked for 11 years in general practice, working my way up into management until, unfortunately I felt my heart was no longer in it. I had grown tired of late finishes and running myself ragged and felt there was perhaps a different career out there somewhere. So, I left dentistry and worked in administration. I soon learned that the grass was not always greener on the other

side and felt the pull to return to dental nursing. I realised that it was the managerial role at that point in my career that was just not for me and I missed the patients, working chairside, doing what I loved. I did however want to try something different from general practice, so I set out to find something else which would suit me better. Something a bit different. By this time, GDC registration had come into the equation and I had to become registered before I could work. Once registered I found myself a job in a local Maxillofacial and Orthodontic Unit and I loved it!

During my eight years in Maxfax and Ortho, I qualified in Dental Sedation Nursing, Dental Radiography and Wound Care including suture and clip removal. If there was a course going, I put my hand up to complete it. I even completed a course in study skills as I hadn't participated in any formal learning for a number of years – I had to learn how to learn. I assisted in orthodontics, minor oral surgery, the head and neck oncology clinics, maxillofacial trauma as well as dabbling in restorative dentistry and implantology. I think my favourite clinics were the nurse-led dressing clinics. I was able to see patients and treat their wounds by myself and refer patients to practice nurses for long term care, or request the assistance of the maxillofacial surgeons in cases that were more complex or needed treatment beyond my skills. I mentored new dental nurses starting in the department and started to provide some training here and there. My managers there were supportive and encouraged me to complete a Level 3 Certificate in Education and Training. I knew then that my calling was also in teaching.

I changed my job and moved into special care dentistry, where I have now been for six years. I wanted to be involved in teaching and I knew that my new employer had a dental nurse training school. Within a few months, I was working alongside the dental nurse tutor and training dental nurses. My dream job was about to come to fruition.

From here, I went on to complete my Level 5 Diploma in Education and Training. It was a lot of hard work over two years whilst I worked full time. But in 2019 I completed the qualification, becoming a fully-fledged teacher! My Dad had trained as a teacher later in life, and my niece is currently looking to train as a teacher, so I guess it now runs in the family.

In 2019 I was jointly nominated alongside the other dental nurse tutor as Mentor of the Year within our NHS Trust. We didn't win but we were runners up. As they say, 'it's the taking part that counts'. It's so true: the recognition from the nomination was enough for me.

It was at this time that I was introduced to the world of examining for the National



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Examining Board for Dental Nurses (NEBDN). I became an Associate Examiner and completed my first set of OSCEs in January 2020. From my own experiences of completing the OSCE, I can understand that learners will be nervous and I am better able to put them at ease. COVID-19 then hit. We all know that the world of dentistry came to a grinding halt at this time and many things changed for so many of us. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, NEBDN examinations have moved online. It's been a challenge, not just for me as an examiner, but for all the learners and staff at NEBDN. Dentists and dental nurses left the profession and recruiting staff now is a task in itself. During the pandemic we struggled with the recruitment of dental nurses, but there was a shining light in the form of our dental administrator. She was looking for a new challenge and decided to come to the 'dark side' and joined the clinical team as a trainee dental nurse under my supervision.

We got her signed up to an online course and I mentored her through her training and completing her Record of Experience. We even sat around my dining room table the weekend before her exam, revising and focusing on the topics that had not been her stronger points. She passed her written paper in November 2022 and is currently waiting for the results from the recent OSCEs.

In May 2022 I was also appointed as a Subject Matter Expert with NEBDN. I consult with NEBDN over exam questions, course syllabus and contents of the Record of Experience for different qualifications. This is an amazing experience and tests my knowledge to the maximum. It has been keeping me on my toes but is a fantastic opportunity for me to expand my own knowledge base as well as being part of NEBDN's team, especially now NEBDN qualifications are recognised by Ofqual.

I now deliver Inhalation Sedation Training and CPD for the staff within our service. The Inhalation Sedation course is fully accredited with The Royal College of Surgeons and is one of my favourite topics to deliver, alongside Infection Control. Coming up with new ideas for teaching and different topics to cover is something I take pride in. I'm someone who

likes to learn by doing, so I try where possible to teach that way. Dental professionals are in general practical people, so learning by doing is a great way for us all to learn.

During the pandemic, my teaching skills were definitely tested. I started delivering training online and this was a whole new experience for me. Trying to ensure that all participants were engaged in the learning was difficult; I recall one particular session when I felt like a radio presenter asking participants to come on the line and give me an answer! It worked though and everyone had a laugh – probably at my expense!

Outside of work I have rather varied interests. I've found out that I am a little bit of an adrenaline junkie – throwing myself out of perfectly safe aeroplanes, driving tanks around muddy fields, swimming with sharks and flying helicopters and gliders over Sussex have all been great fun. Generally though I enjoy crafting and walking my dog. I handmake all my cards whether they are for Christmas or birthdays. I joined a knitting group at a local church and found that crochet is more my thing than knitting. I have knitted hats for a homeless charity in Brighton and more recently have been knitting hats for premature babies. But during the summer months I can be found driving around the Sussex roads in my 1935 Ford model Y Tudor car. It's a fair-weather hobby as the car does leak in the rain, and it has been known to break down a time or two. I am a member of the Ford Sidevalve Club, Sussex Division, and we proudly show our cars at various events throughout Sussex. If you ever see me, come and say 'hi'.

My job title now is Senior Dental Nurse with Extended Duties in Education and Training. It's a bit of a mouthful but sums up my role. In a nutshell, on top of my teaching duties, I run the clinic, complete audits, order materials and consumables and ensure all medical devices are in good working order. I work clinically alongside some great clinicians in the Special Care Dental Services providing treatments for patients in the dental chair and under inhalation sedation, intravenous sedation and general anaesthesia. Due to the nature of our patients,



Donna's 1935 Ford model Y Tudor car

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treatments can be completed in a variety of ways and we just never know what we will end up doing. Some days we could be singing; others it's the use of talking as a distraction; and on occasions it can mean we see patients in the car park! We do whatever we need to do to get the job done. It doesn't always work, and on those days we do question ourselves and wonder what else we could have done to help our patients. Reflection is a very useful tool to debrief as a team when things don't go to plan. I love the challenge of my clinical role and I'm proud to work for the NHS.

I have made myself a career and carved it out in my own way. I'm passionate about teaching and sharing my skills and knowledge with others. Watching the students grow is something I'm grateful to be a part of. No day is ever the same and I am always learning new things, keeping my brain active. I still can't remember dates though – that's why I have a diary! But I love my job and wouldn't change it for the world.

### An update from Donna

Since writing this article, Donna wrote to *BDJ Team* to say:

My trainee dental nurse has passed her NEBDN Diploma in Dental Nursing!

I had been watching my phone all morning waiting for her to let me know. As soon as I saw the message from her, I was elated. I knew she could do it; she has worked so hard and truly deserves it. There were a few tears from me I must admit. The world is now her oyster. I'm proud to have facilitated her journey so far and can't wait to see what the future holds for her now.

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