

How to sink your teeth into success: unleashing your potential as a dental therapist

By **Ellena Jackson**¹

About this article

As a dental therapist, the journey from student to professional practitioner is filled with opportunities for growth, learning, and success. In a recent talk to students at the University of Leeds, the author of this article, a dually qualified dental hygienist and therapist, shared insights and inspiration on how to unleash your full potential as you make the transition. Drawing from her own experiences and expertise, Ellena's talk offered invaluable guidance for students preparing to embark on their professional careers.

In this *BDJ Team* article Ellena shares insights to help you tailor your CV, master the interview process, and negotiate confidently as you find your first role. From navigating your first year to thriving at work and making a difference, Ellena guides you through practical

Author information

¹Ellena Jackson, a practising dental therapist based in London, qualified with a BSc in Dental Hygiene and Therapy from the University of Leeds. Nominated for Dental Therapist of the Year 2023, she passionately advocates for thorough oral cancer screening in practice. Ellena actively participates in public speaking engagements and shares insights through her page @thetooththerapist on Instagram.



strategies for success. Learn how to build connections, enhance your skills, and foster effective communication to excel in the field of dental hygiene and therapy. Whether you're a recent graduate or a seasoned professional, this article offers actionable advice to help you unleash your full potential and achieve success in your career.

Creating your CV: Make a lasting impression

A curriculum vitae (CV) is your first opportunity to make a lasting impression so it's crucial to create a CV that stands out and effectively showcases your skills and experiences. Of course, the content of your CV is important, but how you display your experience makes such a difference.

Before dentistry I worked for some time in recruitment. When I opened a CV, I wanted to immediately see the words of the job title I was recruiting for. In your CV you should do the same by ensuring that terms like 'dental hygienist and therapist' draw the reader's eye immediately. This is done by making them prominently featured, perhaps in bold or slightly larger than the surrounding text. Now I know, some of you may be students who are thinking 'but I don't have work experience as a hygienist or therapist yet!' Well in this case you need to use your student experience. Provide all the details of the treatments you performed, common patient interactions, and any additional responsibilities or achievements. List each placement as a separate experience to maximise on the impact (Box 1). For example:

- Be sure to choose an easy-to-read professional font. I would also recommend picking a single colour theme to make your CV stand out from the crowd of black-on-white CVs. In Figure 1 you can see the difference between the first page of my CV and that of a generic one. Without seeing the content, which one interests you more?
- Try to utilise white space effectively to avoid overcrowding and ensure easy navigation for the reader. I would recommend having

Box 1 Making your relevant experience stand out

Student Dental Therapist

Leeds Dental Institute
Sept 2021 – June 2023

Exposed to a spectrum of disease. Successfully managed BPE codes of 4 in line with the BSP guidelines. Completed periodontal charting, PMPR, impression taking and necessary referrals. Adult temporary, stepwise and permanent restorations. Experience managing anxious patients. Performed intra-oral and extra-oral radiographs. Educated patients and supported smoking cessation.

Box 2 Include a clear objective statement at the top of your CV

Personal Profile

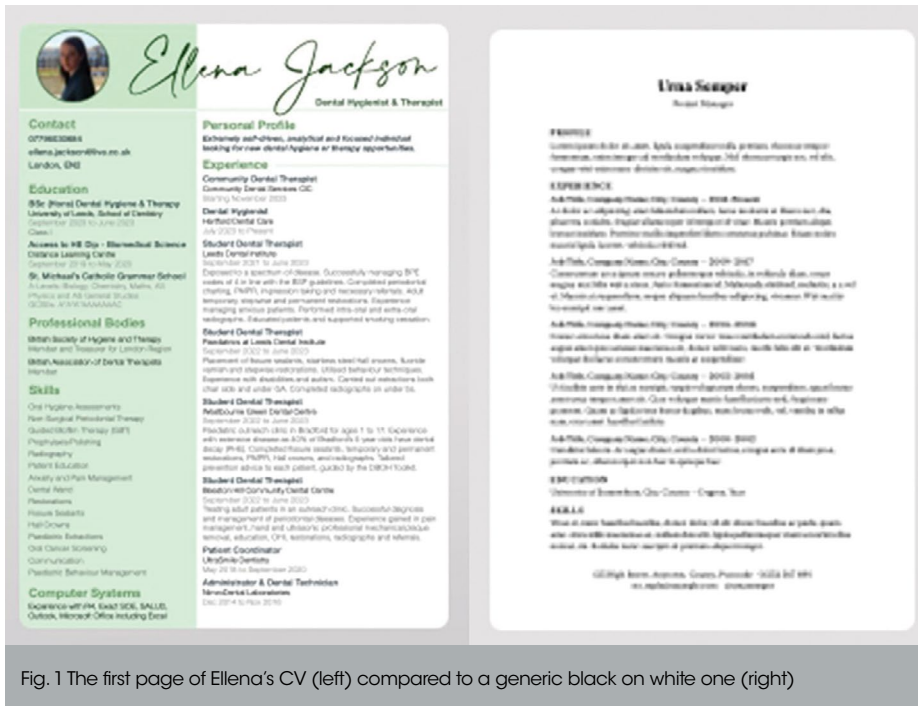
Extremely self-driven analytical and focused individual looking for part time dental hygiene and therapy opportunities including the provision of GBT. Available on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays.

clear sections such as Clinical Experience, Education, Skills, Work Experience, Extra-Curricular Activities, Charity Work and References. Consider the order: you want the areas most relevant and relatable to the job you are applying for to be seen first. This means I should read about your clinical experience as a student before your part time job in Nando's.

At the very top, include a clear objective statement specifying the type of position you're seeking such as full-time or part-time, the treatments you want to provide, and your availability. You can even tailor this section to match the job you're applying for. You want the reader to think you're their perfect fit (Box 2). For example:

- Within the content of your CV, you need to focus on providing only relevant information. Make sure you include your contact details, university qualifications, and work experience. Many recruiters use 'buzz words' to find relevant CVs, so consider a skills section of your CV that includes the treatments you are able to provide. I would recommend omitting details such as your age and definitely your full home address for

'Authenticity goes a long way in making a lasting impression. Allow your personality to shine through and convey your genuine passion for dental hygiene and therapy.'



Box 3 Potential questions to ask during interviews

- Why is the position available?
- Will I be working to the scope of a hygienist or a therapist?
- Is the position an employed role or a self-employed role?
- What days are you looking for someone?
- How long are the appointments?
- What are the hours and breaks?
- Is there nursing support?
- Who is responsible for decontaminating my instruments?
- Is there a PGD (Patient Group Directive)?
- Do you have patients coming for appointments under direct access?
- Will I be seeing children?
- Is there anyone who can provide me with clinical support if I am unsure?
- What is the pay?
- If the patient does not show up, is there an FTA (failed to attend) charge?
- What dental computer system do you use?
- Can I look at the diary?
- Will I be responsible for filling the diary?
- What equipment do you have?
- Can you show me the surgery?
- Can I shadow your current hygienist?
- Do you provide uniform?
- What is the process for taking annual leave?
- Is there a distance clause in the contract?

ask insightful questions during the interview. Speaking of questions, don't forget to prepare some of your own. You can refer to the list in Box 3 or compile your own list of thoughtful questions that will help you determine if the position aligns with your career goals. Roles can differ drastically and it's hard to gauge things until you're actually in the job. I was shocked to find that the majority of roles advertised did not offer nursing support. These questions will help you delve into the nitty gritty, gauge the attitude of the practice and ultimately prevent you walking into the wrong position. I would

personal safety reasons. In this section you could simply use your area and then the first part of your postcode.

- Don't be put off from including a professional and friendly photograph in your CV. This can help you to stand out, demonstrate confidence and engage the reader. I would only include a head shot with a simple background. Make sure you consider the impression this photo will make by carefully selecting your outfit and so on. I would recommend avoiding any filters, holiday photos or using blurry shots.

Once you're working, make sure to continuously update and refine your CV as you gain new experiences and achievements in your career.

Navigating the job search: Securing your ideal position

Finding the right role for you requires a proactive approach. By incorporating the following strategies, you'll expand your job search reach and increase your chances of finding the ideal dental hygiene and therapy position that aligns with your career aspirations.

From my experience I have found Indeed (uk.indeed.com) to be the best online job board for dental hygiene and therapy positions. You can register for alerts to stay updated on job opportunities and I would recommend doing this immediately so you can get an idea of what's out there. You can also tailor the notifications to your preferences and location so they are as relevant as possible. If you are looking for employment opportunities within the National Health Service then it is best to check NHS Jobs

however they often are posted to Indeed as well.

Word of mouth is another way of finding work. Reach out to DCPs you know who are already qualified and working in the field. They can offer valuable insights, advice, and potentially even job leads based on their network. You can also visit the British Society of Dental Hygiene & Therapy (BSDHT) website and Instagram page which often posts vacancies. Try joining relevant Facebook groups dedicated to dental hygiene and therapy. These groups serve as valuable platforms for networking, sharing job leads, and seeking advice from peers.

The final way, which I would strongly recommend, is to email dental practices directly, even if they aren't actively advertising job vacancies. Express your interest in joining their team and inquire about potential job opportunities or upcoming vacancies. Networking in this manner can often lead to hidden job opportunities. Every practice I have done this with invited me in for an interview which would never have happened if I simply waited for them to post a job. Often jobs can open up and get filled through word of mouth without ever been advertised, so you must be proactive.

Editor's note: You can also find DCP vacancies on BDJ Jobs! Visit <https://www.bdjjobs.com/jobs/hygienists-therapists/>.

Mastering the interview: Be prepared

First and foremost, preparation is key. Take the time to research the practice or institution you're interviewing with. Familiarise yourself with their website, services, and values. This background knowledge not only demonstrates your interest in the role but also equips you to

also advise asking a potential employer if you can locum or trial with them before accepting the job.

When it comes to attire, remember to dress smartly. While dental practices may not have a strict formal dress code, presenting yourself professionally shows respect for the opportunity and reflects positively on your character so do make the effort.

Throughout the interview, remember to be yourself. Authenticity goes a long way in making a lasting impression. Allow your personality to shine through and convey your genuine passion for dental hygiene and therapy. A warm smile can help create a positive rapport with the interviewer and showcase your friendly demeanour.

‘Discussing pay can be really daunting. Before the interview it is imperative that you get yourself clued up on the figures prior to asking the question of pay.’

Interestingly, dental hygiene and therapy interviews in general practice tend to be less formal compared to other industries. It's rare for them to include clinical questions, so I would focus more on discussing your experiences, skills, and fit for the practice. If however you are going for a hospital position or community role, I would prepare for clinical questions.

Generally I would advise you to attend every interview you are offered, even just for practice. This will allow you to hone your techniques and build confidence. After each interview, take the time to reflect on how it went. Identify areas where you excelled and areas where you can improve. This reflection process will help you to prepare you for future interviews. Following unsuccessful interviews, don't hesitate to ask for feedback and remember, preparation, authenticity, and a positive attitude are key to interview success.

Money: Securing your worth

Hygienist and therapist positions are either employed or self-employed. Employed roles usually have an annual salary or hourly rate. Self-employed roles tend to have an hourly rate or offer a percentage of the appointments or treatment completed. Other than this, the main differences between the two include holiday pay, maternity cover, how your tax is paid, invoicing, sick pay, and how you take

annual leave. Deciding which is right for you is a personal decision. Many clinicians work part time in multiple places and have some even combination of both self-employed and employed work.

Discussing pay can be really daunting and it can be nerve racking to have to bring the topic up if the practice doesn't do so first. Before the interview it is imperative that you get yourself clued up on the figures prior to asking the question of pay. Pay does vary by area but for private self-employed hygiene roles, generally I think you want to be looking to earn about 35–40% of the appointment cost (Box 4). I have been for job interviews where they charge £115 for a hygiene appointment for 45 minutes and they are paying 40% which works out at £61 per

hour. I have been for others where they charge £150 for a 45-minute appointment and they want to pay £30 per hour. So if you're going for an interview, look at what their costs are for an appointment or relevant treatment and find out how long the appointments are. You want to make sure, even if it's an hourly rate being offered, that it's working out at around the right percentage. Having the figures in your head can make the negotiation easier and prevent you becoming flustered. For example:

Box 4 What should your pay be?

Let's say a private practice is advertising for a hygienist and let's say their appointment cost is £80 for 30 minutes.

This means the practice is earning £160 every hour. You want to walk in with the following figures in your mind:

- 40% of £160 is £64 per hour.
- 35% would be £56 per hour

If you then are offered £40 per hour, you know this is below the market average. It is in fact about 25%. It could be easy to accept this figure at interview, but later on you may realise you have sold yourself short.

In employed positions, working for the NHS, in community roles or for the foundation training, pay is often wildly different. Treating NHS patients in general practice tends to work on a UDA based system which I would recommend doing some research into beforehand. At the interview ask questions to gain an accurate insight on what you can expect to earn. Employed roles offering salaries or hourly rates come with many benefits like sick pay and maternity cover. It is important to remember that although we likely all want to earn a good wage, taking a pay cut early in your career can be worth it for the clinical experience you will gain. So don't just chase the money! Think about the benefits of the position as a whole.

Practice life: Finding your feet

As you approach qualifying, you may find yourself extremely excited about many things, like what colour scrubs you're going to buy. It's really important however to take a moment and make sure you are adequately prepared. There are a few things I would recommend doing; some are of course essential, such as indemnity, but others can be really beneficial to your wellbeing and progression.

Indemnity

Indemnity is a crucial component of professional practice. It provides protection against claims offering financial coverage for legal costs and compensation. As a dental hygiene and therapy professional, securing adequate indemnity is essential for practice and the plus is that many indemnifiers offer you various forms of support as a clinician. I would recommend looking at the Dental Defence Union (DDU) who charge you £10 for your first year. I have found them to be quick to respond to messages and have short wait times upon calling. Whether you work under direct access or not, I would advise you to put this cover on your indemnity just in case. Also remember to check the number of sessions that you are covered for as a session works out at about four hours so can be a little confusing.

Income protection

Four months after starting out in practice I was unfortunately hit by another car when driving home. This led me to being off work with injuries for around five weeks. Due to being self-employed I suddenly was unable to earn an income and having just left university I didn't have a large savings pot to help me through. I wish I had known earlier that you can actually take out something called income protection. I would recommend setting this up as it would have been so helpful for me during that time.

You never know what might happen or when it might happen and income protection may just save you from a lot of financial stress.

Loupes

Transitioning from university to practice has many different impacts, but one you are almost certainly going to notice is the impact on your back and neck. I would strongly advise investing in a pair of ergonomic refractive loupes such as those made by Bryant, MyErgo or Orasoptic. These loupes allow you to sit up straight without craning your neck whilst still having a perfect visual of the patient's mouth. You can opt for different magnifications depending on your preference which can help with precision. Investing in your body will enable you to have a long and pain free career. Loupes don't come cheap, but most loupes companies offer some form of financing to help with affordability. They're also tax deductible so that can be a nice relief in your first year.

Instruments

Equipment can vary from practice to practice and even more so in other settings. You should have a good idea of what your practice has based on your interview and therefore you may wish to buy some instruments that you have grown familiar with at university. This can improve your confidence when starting out in practice. Make sure to ask for discounts or discount codes. Some companies offer them to newly qualified clinicians and others might just give you a random discount if you're lucky. Remember instruments are also tax deductible.

Your first day

When it comes to your first day, you want to try and ensure things run as smoothly as possible so as to prevent stress. Try and shadow a clinician at the practice before your first day to get an idea of where things are and how things work. If you can, have a look at the patients in your diary the day before so you are prepared. On the day, arrive nice and early, advisably at least 30 minutes. Depending on the structure of the day and whether you run late you may find it difficult to get out to buy lunch or pop to the loo. I think it's important to expect that you will run late. Many of us saw two or three patients a day at university so transitioning to 10+ can be a significant challenge. I would advise asking your practice to schedule longer appointments for the first two weeks or to include some 15-minute gaps that you can use as catch up or break time. However, to be safe, bring some lunch, a big bottle of water and maybe some snacks. Finally, do not be afraid to ask for help. Whether you're asking how the foot pedal works or getting a dentist in to review a suspicious lesion, you are

undoubtedly going to need something. The practice will likely expect this if they are hiring a newly qualified candidate so don't suffer in silence.

Building connections: Enhancing your skills

Networking is an essential aspect of professional growth for DCPs. Attending conferences, award ceremonies, and study clubs provides perfect opportunities to ask questions, connect with others, learn from industry experts, and stay updated on the latest advancements. In-person CPD events offer a platform for expanding knowledge and skills while fostering meaningful connections within the dental community. Using social media platforms like Instagram to showcase your journey and engage with colleagues can enhance your online presence and facilitate networking beyond the usual settings. Additionally, engaging in conversations with colleagues and actively participating in professional circles will help to establish your reputation and get your name out there, paving the way for future opportunities. Below I have listed my recommendations.

Registrations and communities

- British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy (@bsdht)
- British Association of Dental Therapists (@badt_uk)
- London Dental Hygiene and Therapy Study Club (@ldhtsc)
- Dental Hygienist and Therapist Network (Facebook Group)
- Dental Tubules (@dentaltubules)
- Dentistry Show ExCel London (@dentistryshows).

Courses

- EMS GBT (@emsdental)
- Perio School (@perio_school)
- 3-day Masterclass (@periowithdeepak)
- Advanced Hand-Instrumentation (@periowithdeepak)
- Online webinars (@periowithdeepak)
- The Modern Therapist (@cat_londontherapist)
- Totally Therapist (@freshdental_institute)
- Totally Composite (@freshdental_institute)
- Online webinars (@hh_periodonitics).

If you do have any questions, or simply need some advice or support, please do not hesitate to email me: thetooththerapist@gmail.com or find me on Instagram @thetooththerapist.

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