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Oral surgery

Fainters, pull up your socks!

Sir, I have always been a fainter. I was that child in the school choir, and I was that student in dental school. When I was 16, I shadowed my general dentist for work experience. Standing there, peering into the patient's mouth, I watched the procedure eagerly. Then I felt it creep up on me. An uncomfortable warmth, followed by a dry mouth, tingles in my legs, blurred vision, and ringing in my ears. The next thing I knew, the dental nurse was

kneeling next to me, with the patient horrified that her procedure caused me to faint.

Ten years on, not much has changed. Any period of extended standing for procedures is likely to bring about a fainting episode. This had not been a major challenge, as dentistry mostly involves seated work. Cue September 2019, however, and this was to change as I embarked on 12 months of oral and maxillofacial surgery as a dental core trainee. The prospect of full days spent in theatre caused me to seek advice from friends in the medical and dental fields, as well as Dr Google.

A 2009 study¹ reported that 12% of medical students suffer from operating theatre related syncope. Causes noted included hot temperatures, prolonged standing, wearing a surgical mask, and the smell of diathermy. Its solutions concurred with some of the advice from friends – eating a big breakfast, keeping well hydrated, moving legs throughout the operation, sitting down and taking regular breaks. More unusual suggestions from others included consuming large quantities of crisps, and squeezing the legs and buttocks (one's own, of course).

I applied all of these on the first day, but to no avail. About an hour into the operation, I found myself on a trolley, hooked up to a blood pressure monitor while being served apple juice. A long year was ahead...

One new suggestion came in – to try compression socks. Yes, compression socks, normally reserved for deep vein thrombosis, varicose veins, and long-haul flights. With nothing to lose, and plenty of pride to regain, I ordered them to arrive before the next theatre session. It has now been over two months, and I can safely say that they have been the best investment of my career. No more fainting episodes, and cosy legs to boot. This is, of course, anecdotal evidence, but I highly recommend anyone who experiences light-headedness or fainting during theatre or oral surgery to give them a try.

M. Hennigan, Scotland, UK

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