*‘Being a dental hygienist
is just wonderful’*

Dutch DCP Chantal Swarts has always known that dental hygiene is her true calling, says **Kate Maynard**.

Dutch dental hygiene student Chantal Swarts has three ambitions: to work in dentistry, to write a book and to start a goat farm. At the age of 22 she has already completed dental nurse training, has wide ranging work experience and is well on her way to qualifying as a dental hygienist. Her bestseller and the goats will have to wait!

Chantal grew up in Vlagtwedde, a small town in the east of the province of Groningen in the Netherlands, near the German border (she speaks German as well as Dutch and English). She is currently studying full-time for a Bachelor of Health as a dental hygienist at the University of Groningen and will graduate in July this year.

Chantal's interest in dentistry was sparked in her childhood: 'every time we went to the dentist I was very curious and wanted to know what all the different tools were used for. When I was 16 I did work experience at my own dentist's and it was just wonderful. There was so much variety to the work and I discovered that you need to work precisely and deal with stress. This really appealed to me.'

When Chantal finished the Dutch equivalent of secondary school later that year, she decided to undertake the three-year dental nurse programme in Groningen, in order to gain the experience and qualifications that would allow her to train as a dental hygienist.

'I think I made a really good decision,' says Chantal. 'During the dental nurse course I learned how to deal with patients, improved my communication skills and acquired a wide range of general knowledge about dentistry.' For example she learnt how a dentist performs endodontic and implant treatments and about the anatomy of the head and chest region. This set Chantal in good stead for her dental hygienist training later on.

While in training Chantal worked in a variety of dental practices as a dental nurse

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and continues to do so when she is able to, part-time, while she studies dental hygiene. Her goal has always been to become a dental hygienist, but as a dental nurse with extended duties she is already able to remove supragingival calculus.

'I love being a dental nurse, in particular working with lots of different people and trying to motivate them,' says Chantal, 'but while working as a dental nurse I felt like something was missing. Graduating as a dental nurse aged 18 enabled me to apply for a place on the dental hygienist course.'

In the Netherlands dental hygienist courses are offered in four cities, Amsterdam,

Nijmegen, Utrecht and Groningen. Every year there are around 300 places available, with competition for places. To join a dental hygiene course, explains Chantal, you have to draw a place, but Chantal had a guaranteed place because she had passed her dental nurse course with honours.

The University of Groningen operates a system where undergraduate dentists and dental hygienists work closely together, which Chantal believes leads to a lot of respect between the two disciplines.

'The dental students know that they are not as good at removing calculus as we are,' says Chantal. 'So most of them are open to learning from us. On the other hand, we

dental hygienist students only have a little bit of experience in restoring teeth compared to the dental students, so we ask them for help.'

There are not enough dentists in the Netherlands so the undergraduate dental students are under a lot of pressure. 'Today dentists are trained more and more to perform surgical and other complex treatments, so they do not have time for the less complex ones. Consequently they need to delegate some duties to the dental hygienist. They know that we are trained to do these tasks,' says Chantal.

The dental hygienist profession is well established in the Netherlands. In 1968 the first Dutch dental hygienist course began in Utrecht and in 1992 the two-year course became three years, then four years from 2002 onwards. The extended programme allows more time for evidence-based working and specialised duties, explains Chantal. Since 2002 dental hygienists in the Netherlands have been allowed to drill and fill primary caries (when they pass relevant tests), as long as it is carried out in a dental practice where a dentist is also present. Since 2006 patients can actually visit a dental hygienist without being referred by a dentist, which Chantal considers to be 'a big step forward in dental health care'.

However, 'although it is not necessary to have a referral from the dentist to visit the dental hygienist, the dentist always has the main responsibility for treatment, and we work closely with the dentist. If we prescribe a treatment, we first discuss it with the dentist.'

Unlike in the UK, it is not yet mandatory for dental hygienists in the Netherlands to register and complete CPD in order to practise. However, in January 2009 the Dutch dental hygienist organisation NVM set up a voluntary register called the KRM and regular training is a requirement of signing up.

The duties and responsibilities of a dental hygienist in the Netherlands vary depending on the dental practice that employs them. The most important thing, says Chantal, is that the dental hygienist feels that they are competent to carry out a duty, whether it is working in a specialist orthodontic practice or carrying out tooth whitening treatment. Dutch dental hygienists carry

out scaling and root planing and they are also permitted to make sealants, take radiographs, give anaesthetic, do alginate impressions and treat primary caries. Dutch patients normally have check-ups once or twice a year, similar to the UK.

'I think the main task of a dental hygienist is primary and secondary prevention and influencing patients' behaviour,' says Chantal. 'We want to prevent caries and periodontitis by educating our patients and instructing them on how to care for their teeth effectively.' When caries and periodontitis occur, Chantal's job is to limit the damage.

'It can be challenging to get through to some patients,' says Chantal. 'Patients will come in saying they have perfect oral hygiene then they open their mouth and there are plaque and pockets everywhere!'

When she graduates as a dental hygienist Chantal would like to work in a general dental practice with a dentist so that she is able to restore teeth by way of drilling and filling primary teeth. She would also rather work in general practice than in a periodontology or hygiene-only practice because she enjoys working with child patients. She has in fact already been offered a job for 1-2 days a week at a general practice in Groningen and thinks she may take it. In 2009 she completed a three-and-a-half month work placement at the

University of Gothenburg, Sweden and particularly enjoyed working, among other places, at the Mun-H-Center. This is a centre for special needs patients in Gothenburg and Chantal found working with the patients there a very rewarding experience. She hopes to do a postgraduate course on special needs patients in Amsterdam in the future. When asked about her

interests outside of dentistry, Chantal admits to an addiction to a board game called *Kolonisten van Catan* (pictured here) and says that she loves Encaustic art (painting with beeswax) and writing stories and poems.

At the moment, of course, with graduation just months away, a lot of Chantal's time is taken up with working on university projects and treating patients at the university. She is keen to recommend becoming a dental hygienist to others as a career choice, for as she says: 'Having nice teeth is so important for a lot of things! The teeth are part of the first impression you form of a person, and I think it is wonderful to have a part in that.'

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