



‘I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY WITH A DECISION’

Dental hygiene and therapy student **Mark Thurston** describes his winding road through dentistry and outlines his recommendations for other aspirational dental nurses.

My name is Mark and I am a first year dental hygiene and therapy student at The Centre for Dental Care Professionals at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry.

Before Christmas I passed my first clinical assessment, an observed task in which I removed caries from an extracted tooth with a slow handpiece and restored the cavity with temporary cement. I have also been assessed in diverse areas such as psychology and radiography. My second term has started with taking impressions of each other ready to cast, and working with the fast handpiece to prepare cavities and place amalgam restorations. I cannot wait to move on to the clinic, working with patients at the first opportunity, which really motivates me to work hard.

I consider myself very fortunate to have been given a very competitive place on this course as I work towards my goal of becoming a dental hygienist and therapist. I hope that through sharing my experiences with the readers of *Vital*, other dental nurses will be inspired to pursue a career in dental hygiene and therapy.

MARK'S JOURNEY

When I left school in Devon in 1997 I had not formed a clear view of what I wanted to do as a career. I did work experience in a bank but heard that banking was no longer a job for life, which wasn't encouraging. When I received my GCSE results, family members suggested studying IT at college, a stable background for a mainstream job, so I signed up at the local college.

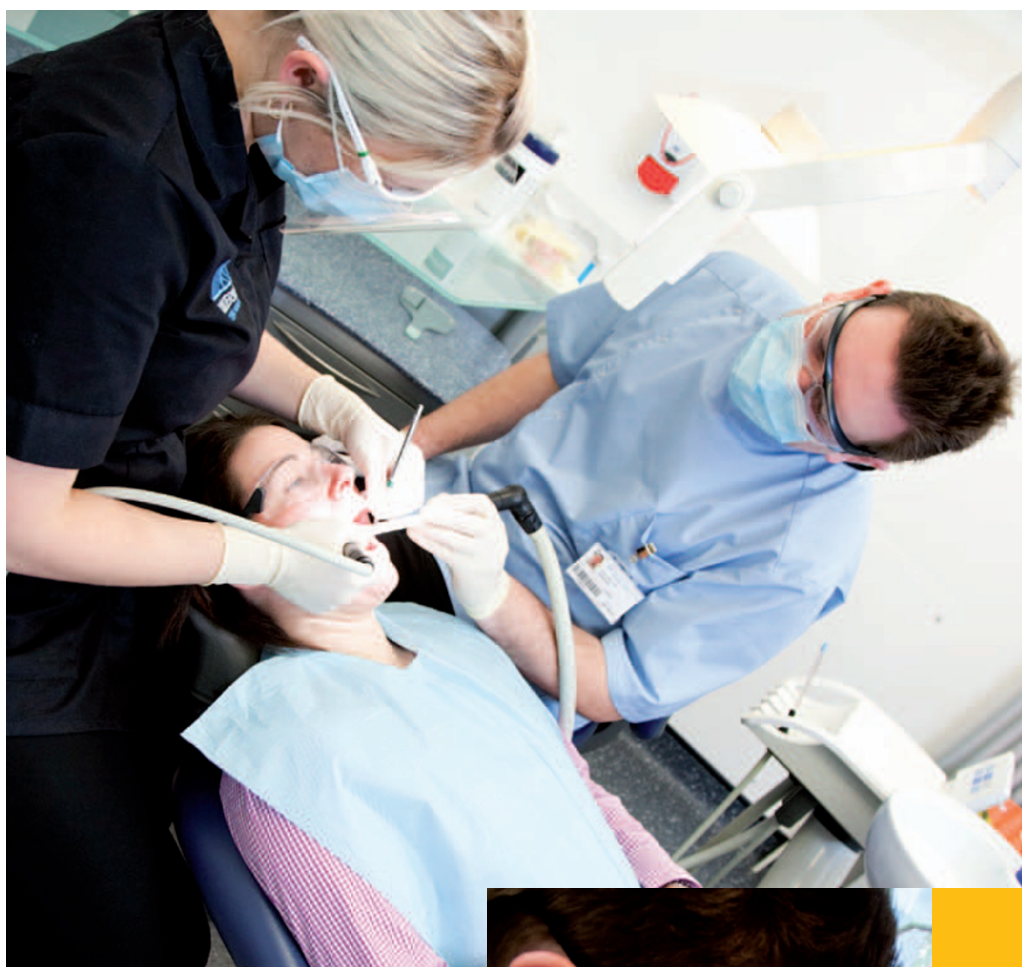


I was there for the full two years but became disillusioned with the subject halfway through the second year, and strayed into computer repair work. When I completed my course without a qualification I spent the next couple of years working as a computer-builder, in computer sales and then for an internet company.

An epiphany

It was around this time that a strange combination of circumstances attracted me to a career in dentistry. I had been fixing computers out-of-hours for a long time and had formed an unhealthy allegiance with carbonated drinks and filter coffee. It had been some years since I had been to see a dentist, and due to a shortage of NHS dental care in my area, I saved up to see a private dentist.

The dentist took the time to explain to me what erosion, attrition and abrasion were – of course I had managed to present all three at once! This sparked something within me: I wanted to know more about teeth. I hadn't thought of them as living things before; I think I assumed they were like statues! Prior to that moment I wasn't aware of disease processes affecting teeth. I wanted to get my own teeth back on the straight and narrow as a priority, but



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I also wanted to know the science behind teeth.

I felt about a hundred times more excited about a career in dentistry than I ever had about computers, and applied for 13 dental nurse positions. The response was slow when, out of the blue, I received a telephone call from a practice manager inviting me to an interview.

Being in the dental practice environment when not in blurred-vision patient mode was both nerve-racking and exciting. I struggled with the interview, however, as it was difficult to explain why I wanted to make such a dramatic career change. The practice manager must have seen some potential in me though as I was called to a second interview a week later and was then offered the job.

To dental nursing and beyond

My first week as a trainee dental nurse was interesting to say the least. I remember being

sat in the relative's chair for the first two days watching treatment. I must have been as white as a sheet as patients asked me if I was okay and thought I was recovering! Seeing treatment from a third party perspective was a whole new experience to take in. Slowly, I got more involved, and the dental nurse started to teach me the names of instruments. By the end of week one I knew that I could do it and as the weeks passed, my confidence grew as I worked alongside different dentists and nurses.

A year after starting, I was enrolled on the National Certificate course at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, generously funded by the practice. I passed first time and gained my certificate after two years as a trainee dental nurse.

But I wanted to progress even further, and enrolled on an access course to prepare mature students for university education in Manchester.





One month after qualifying as a dental nurse, I moved to Manchester to begin the access course.

Transitioning from working as a dental nurse to undertaking full time study was very difficult. It was a return to academic subjects including science, maths and English, five years after I had left school. I made shaky progress, but managed an overall pass mark of 60%, and sent off my university applications via UCAS.

Hygiene and therapy

Dental hygiene and therapy attracted me because I think it is a great way for a dental nurse to transfer to being a clinician. A lot of thought and considerations must be made by any clinician during the course of delivering dental care to a patient. As a trained and motivated dental nurse I wondered how it must feel to build that rapport with a patient and be able to provide a patient with pain relief to a high standard.

In my experience many clinicians are still unfamiliar with the full remit of the hygienist/therapist. The full scope of practice can be found on the General Dental Council's website but some dentists are still unsure what we can contribute to dentistry, despite dental hygienists and therapists being around for years.

Due north

My interview experiences for dental hygiene and therapy courses were varied. After an interview for Birmingham I was left feeling completely out of my depth, which was a nasty surprise, although I have since realised that the choice of dental school is personal and different courses suit different people.

I was also offered an interview for an application I had made outside of UCAS for a new course starting up that year in Inverness, Scotland. I received an offer as a result of that interview. Despite apprehension surrounding the location – due to it being at the opposite end of the country from my family and friends – I took the offer with great excitement, as the course was new and dynamic, and introduced clinical components very early on.

The course started in September 2008, with great fanfare and many press photographs.

Unfortunately personal circumstances prevented me from progressing on this programme, and by mutual agreement I left after a term.

Finding my path

I was still determined to work in dentistry, but after quite a dark period where I was running

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out of funds and wondering where to turn next, I ended up back at my mother's house near Exeter and applying for dental nursing jobs in Bristol and Manchester. Bristol was close to home, and Manchester was somewhere I was comfortable. The ADP Dental Practice in Hartcliffe, Bristol came to my rescue with a job offer, and consequently while working there my confidence was restored.

At this practice I was exposed to some procedures which I had not seen before, and I got to see, and ask about, different techniques being used for procedures. I also had the opportunity to meet a hygienist at a practice for the very first time. I had amazing support from all of the staff at the Hartcliffe practice.

I was unsure about whether I had the confidence to apply for the dental hygiene/therapy course again, but I was encouraged by the practice staff and supported with positive references. During this time I also rediscovered city life, and decided that I was definitely a big-city guy and wanted to choose a dental school in a vibrant community.

A considered approach

This time, I started preparing early. I found a copy of my first shortlist of dental hygiene and therapy courses and looked at each programme in turn and thought initially about the location. It had to be a location with a large population, plenty of amenities and good transport links. I went to the websites of courses that interested me and distilled details of tuition styles and course structures. I shortlisted six courses and then ordered prospectuses for each of them.

Reactions to my applications varied. Some courses did not consider students from an access course background and some suggested alternative routes of entry such as taking foundation programmes. Others offered me an interview directly. I attended all of these interviews while looking into the alternative entry routes that were suggested to me.

Lured by London

I had visited London several times when I was younger. I had always felt like a tourist but at the same time I never felt apprehensive about it as a city. It seemed to work as a place to live and work to me, boasting fantastic transport links both within London and to other major cities, whole different atmospheres depending on the district, and with everything available where and when it is needed. Nowhere else feels quite the same.

Barts and The London were at the top of my list for dental hygiene and therapy courses. Something had struck me about the ethos exuded by the website of the dental school; it sounded very forward-thinking and I was excited that hygiene and therapy students would be mingling with undergraduate dental students for a large part of the course. They had always received my most considered application, and every shred of supporting detail which I could provide. When I made my application to them this time around, I had butterflies in my stomach. I didn't know what would be made of the history which my application revealed, but I hoped that they would see my potential and determination.

When I opened the envelope from Barts and The London, enclosing an interview date and time, I had to read the letter twice before I could believe it, and then got someone else to read it as well! Needless to say the few weeks between receiving the letter and the interview itself seemed to take a long time indeed. When the day finally came round I left the interview feeling that my prior feelings about the university, and the course in particular, had been well founded. I had never felt so much that something was right for me.

Around two and a half months later I was offered a place on the course! After everything



that had happened, I had somehow managed to make this happen for myself. To say that I was excited was an understatement.

A whirlwind of activity followed as I researched living in London, obtaining funds, finding somewhere to live and then finishing my dental nursing job and bidding farewell to Bristol. I could hardly wait for the first day on my course to arrive and to see who else I would be studying with.

A fantastic experience

I have never been so happy with a decision. Embarking on my second semester, every day has been amazing. The teaching is of an incredibly high quality, yet all staff and students are unbelievably approachable. The Dental School is celebrating its centenary this year, having been formed in 1911, and has a well deserved reputation for providing a positive student experience. I work with a great mix of students within my course group, and when we are studying with the second year dentistry students, the mix is even more diverse. Yet we all seem to get on very well together, and the more that we study, the more people I am getting to know. It's a fantastic life experience, and my proudest moment will be when I qualify from here.

Recommended reading

- Cross A. *Getting into dental school*, 7th ed. Trotman Publishing (scheduled for publication in February 2011).
- General Dental Council. Scope of practice. April 2009. www.gdc-uk.org/NR/rdonlyres/6EB13E9A-50EC-4AA3-861F-632D361BBE9D/93330/ScopeofpracticeApril2009.pdf
- General Dental Council. Dental hygiene and dental therapy programmes and qualifications. www.gdc-uk.org/Our+work/Education+and+quality+assurance/Programmes+and+qualifications/Dental+the+rapy+and+dental+hygiene.htm
- Schoonhoven F. 'We are the link between the dentist and the patient.' *Vital* summer 2009; 26-30.
- Banerjee A, Watson T F. *Pickard's manual of operative dentistry*, 9th ed. Oxford University Press (scheduled for publication in February 2011).

If you are looking for a dental hygiene and therapy/oral health sciences course, why not visit the Vital dental care professional course directory, last published in the summer 2010 issue of Vital (page 13). You can visit past issues of Vital through the 'Archive' link at www.nature.com/vital.

Mark's tips

Applying to dental hygiene and therapy courses

Applying

1. Courses require full-time study for two to three years, whether it's a higher education diploma or a degree, and holidays are sometimes shorter than those for other students, so choosing to study dental hygiene and therapy is a lifestyle decision you need to make carefully.
2. Take time out to consider your options. Order a prospectus and compare the way that you like to learn as an individual with the tuition methods of each course.
3. Apply to institutions as far and wide as you can as interview panels look for different qualities and places on dental hygiene and therapy courses are limited and highly competitive.
4. When deciding which courses to apply for, list by preference. Work on your personal statement – roughly one side of typed A4 paper for the UCAS application. You can either fill out your UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) form online or email institutions for application packs. I preferred using an individual application pack where one was available, as I had the freedom to modify details such as my personal statement to cover the points for individual institutions.
5. Responses to your applications can take a number of months so try not to worry that you haven't heard anything for some time. Try not to be disheartened if you do get any rejections – there are very limited places on each course and sometimes admissions departments can tell whether or not you will fit their criteria just from the application. When you feel ready, write back to the institution and request some feedback on your application.

Interviews

1. As soon as you receive an offer of an interview, get the day booked off at work. Look at your funding options while you study, and get applications for a student loan and an NHS bursary (if applicable to your course) completed and sent off as soon as possible. If choices fall through you can advise the agencies of your change of course. Their advice recommends that you apply for funding based on your first choice even before you get a firm offer.
2. Review your personal statement before you go for interview, refer to the course outline and think about the questions the interview panel could ask. Make sure that you are prepared to give realistic projections of future career goals, have a good understanding of the course structure, and can explain why you want to study at a specific institution.

Post-interview

1. If you didn't receive an offer, feedback from the institution should help you prepare an effective application for the following year's intake.
2. If you did receive an offer, reassess your funding options and confirm your course choice with the relevant agencies. Start looking for university accommodation and thinking about how you will budget for living costs and items such as textbooks and stationery. I was too late to get a room in university halls but did secure a room in a student block owned privately. They are much more cost effective than privately rented flats and a great way to meet and mix with other students.

Mark was photographed at Waterside Dental Health in Canary Wharf. Many thanks to Nitin Nagpaul and his dental team for their hospitality.