'A daily dose of
laughter
is
essential'

Polymath dental therapist **Christine Macleavy** outlines her impressive career to date in this exclusive interview with *Vital*.

VITAL: Did you have any ambitions to work in dentistry when you left school?

CM: No interest in dentistry whatsoever. I always wanted to teach. When I left school I went to the local college of further education to take A-levels. My school had no sixth form and most of my friends left at 16 and soon had jobs and money. This was a huge distraction for me so I left after a couple of months and took the first job the youth employment office had on their books – as a dental nurse. I was shortly made redundant from this job, so I applied to teacher training college in Portsmouth, on the strength of my O-levels, and was accepted. At the last minute I changed my mind about going. I remember my Dad saying 'Well if you're not going to teacher training college, what are you going to do?' Completely randomly I said 'I'm going to join the Navy'. The next day he had driven me to the Naval Recruitment Office in Northampton and there was no turning back. Having completed the basic training at HMS Dauntless in Reading, I then went to HMS Nelson in Portsmouth to complete dental surgery assistant (DSA) training.

VITAL: What were your first impressions of being a dental nurse?

CM: On my very first day as a dental nurse I was thrown in at the deep end – I had to go into the surgery and help with a surgical. I remember it well and I also remember thoroughly enjoying it! Once in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), however, I received proper training!

VITAL: How long were you a dental nurse?

CM: In total I was a dental nurse from 1972 when leaving school until leaving the WRNS in 1977. The dental officer I worked with at HMS Drake in Plymouth was instrumental in encouraging me to apply to New Cross to become a dental auxiliary (the title changed to dental therapist during my time there).

PROFILE

Name: Christine Anne Macleavy

Town: Kettering

Qualifications: Numerous!

Job title: Dental Therapist

Place of work: Salaried Primary Care Service two days, private practice two days, Eastman School of Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy one day

Hobbies and interests: Hypnosis, NLP, dancing, live music, reading, playing scrabble

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I could have trained in dental hygiene with the Navy but it just didn't appeal at the time. I was frustrated as a dental nurse and wanted to do more. As a dental nurse in the Navy I was expected to be on call. This meant perhaps placing temporary dressings, removing sutures or treating a dry socket. If a patient turned up at the sickbay with toothache it was the duty DSA that was called out. Occasionally a dentist had to be called or contacted by phone for advice. If a patient had a swelling they were taken back down to the sickbay where one of the medics would give them some IM penicillin. I loved the hands-on stuff. My dentist used to let me pack amalgam into cavities and then I'd watch as he carved beautiful restorations.

VITAL: What was it like studying at New Cross, the first school for dental therapists?

CM: New Cross was a strange time for me. I had just come out of the Navy and was somewhat older than most of the other students. Staying at Beltwood hostel [which was used as a hall of residence for dental therapy students for 15 years] was a nightmare. I hated every minute of it and lasted less than a term! For me the regime seemed stricter than I had left behind in the WRNS. Retrospectively it must have been difficult looking after the wellbeing of so many young ladies.

In those days training was totally centred on children. The children were bussed in from the local schools and in the second year we saw patients either every morning or every afternoon. The sheer amount of clinical work we did was amazing.

In the first year, we spent a lot of time drawing teeth and carving teeth out of wax – all anatomically correct – before even picking up a drill. Then once in phantom head we drilled cavities in large chalk teeth, then plastic teeth, before moving on to real teeth.

I remember giving my first local anaesthetic – it was on a child who needed a filling. The tutor came in and did a demonstration by administering half a cartridge and then stood and watched me as I delivered the rest.

When New Cross closed in 1983 I did

not think dental therapists would ever be trained again. I was sad and angry. I was very proud of being a dental therapist, and of the quality of work we produced. When training eventually began again at the London Dental Hospital as a combined course, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand I felt happy that dental therapists would be trained again but part of me was sad because I knew the role of the dental therapist would change as a result. Now I am glad that it did. Dental therapy has evolved into so much more.

VITAL: What skills do you feel that you have that make you particularly suited to dental therapy?

CM: My sense of humour, patience, and an innate ability to explain things and relate to patients. As a child I was terrified of going to the dentist; I believe this has helped me treat children, especially anxious ones. I can totally relate to their apprehension.

VITAL: How did your career develop after you qualified as a dental therapist?

CM: When I qualified I went to work in the Community Dental Service (CDS). It was the only place therapists were permitted to work in those days. Thirty-two years later I am still working there – although nowadays

it is only two days a week! It hasn't been easy working as a dental therapist. In my 32 years of experience I can say that therapists have had a mixed reception.

As we have to work to the dentist's treatment plan it can be quite frustrating when the dentist refers a patient for

me if I was allowed to do a class II on a permanent tooth; another asked me to extract all four first primary molars on a six-year-old,

with LA. The child had never had any treatment before. I felt that was an unrealistic treatment plan and grossly unfair to the poor child.

VITAL: Do you use your full remit of skills as a dental therapist?

CM: Yes I do now! I feel quite strongly that children's primary teeth should be restored as far as possible with consideration to the age and cooperation of the child. If handled well and with enough time to explain things properly, with the proper patient acclimatisation, there is no reason why a child should not have a good experience at the dentist's, have beautifully restored primary teeth and be a compliant patient in the future. Not enough time is given in general practice to treating children, and this has a lot to do with the whole UDA system.

VITAL: At what point did you decide to take further training and become a tutor?

CM: My two sons were growing up and I started to have some free time. Unfortunately there haven't been the same opportunities for career progression for therapists and hygienists as there have been for dental nurses. Initially I did my NVQ III in Training and Development, followed by Assessor and Internal Verifier awards. I began to get involved in dental nurse assessing. Then I heard that the Eastman was planning to run a therapy course and initially, I only had a desire to participate in the planned outreach programme. I did my Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) with this in mind. However, when

treatment that is unrealistic. Children especially tend to be compliant and co-operative when having a check up, yet when treatment is needed, it can be a different story. It is usually the dentist who decides how long the treatment appointment should be and my biggest problem over the years has been not having long enough appointments to treat children. Excellent communication and mutual respect are essential between the prescribing dentist and therapist. Within their remit, dental therapists are highly skilled clinicians, and perform tasks as well as many dentists. As much of their work is with child patients, their child patient management is infinitely better.

VITAL: Do other dental professionals usually understand your role?

CM: I am still amazed that other dental professionals are not fully conversant with the remit of dental therapists. One dentist asked

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I heard that there was a locum therapist post in the paediatric department at the Eastman, I applied and worked there one day a week, for nearly a year. This led to me applying for a tutor post in 1998 when the therapy course began.

VITAL: Did you continue working as a dental therapist while you studied?

CM: Yes, I continued to work full time. It was difficult being a single parent, working and studying, but not impossible. You just have to make sacrifices elsewhere. Ultimately I wanted to gain further knowledge and broaden my horizons. I started to develop an interest in Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and did the practitioner and master practitioner courses. Then I went on to study hypnosis at UCL and finally trained to be an INLPTA trainer (International NLP Trainers Association).

VITAL: What attracted you to teaching?

CM: I have always wanted to teach and love teaching in the higher education sector.

I strive to make the learning experience as enjoyable as possible. I'd like to think that my enthusiasm shines through. Teaching on the Foundation Degree at Barnfield College in Luton gave me the grounding and confidence to teach extended duties to dental nurses which I continue to do independently. At the University of Kent I teach an introduction to NLP as part of the Advanced Communication Skills module which forms part of year two of the BSc Primary Dental Care. I really enjoy this as it gives me the opportunity to share my enthusiasm for NLP with dental care professionals. I think it is great that DCPs have the opportunity to gain a post-qualification degree.

VITAL: When did you launch ChristineMacleavyCoaching?

CM: I was getting more and more involved in teaching, and it seemed a natural progression. It is great to be able to choose what topics to teach and I want to expand this aspect of my career and do less clinical work. I feel after 30 years it is time to slow down a bit. Hopefully by sharing my experience I will encourage

other DCPs to fulfil their ambitions. ChristineMacleavyCoaching wasn't launched as such – it just evolved.

VITAL: How do you manage juggling all your many areas of employment?

CM: It is not too difficult – I make a lot of lists. There are different aspects of each job that I enjoy and since becoming a single parent it never seemed to be a good idea to have only one job. Besides, I know I'd be bored doing the same thing, in the same place, every day. My clinical jobs are vastly different. In CDS, I have few time constraints; I have the opportunity to use relative analgesia with children and adults with special needs as well as hypnosis with anxious and phobic patients. Traditionally the pay is poor compared to practice, but you do get sick pay. In private practice, the pay is better but I don't get sick pay. I get to enjoy treating less demanding patients, although there are time constraints. There are pros and cons of each and I am lucky to have the variety, as well as some really great people to work with! As long as I remember what day of the week it is I'm okay!

VITAL: What are your future career aspirations?

CM: I would dearly love to develop an NLP diploma for dental professionals. I think understanding how other people think, behave and communicate is fascinating. As communication, motivation and persuasion are fundamental to dentistry, learning advanced communication skills through NLP can help us become more patient centred and build rapport quickly and easily, ultimately putting patients at their ease, making our jobs more rewarding and less stressful. I'd like to do more training now, be able to choose when and where to work, to get out of the 9-5 thing, although I know I would miss the interaction with my work colleagues.

VITAL: What do you like to do to relax?

CM: If I'm alone I like to read (NLP books usually – very rarely a novel), go for a walk, or have a nice long bath. I don't watch much TV except maybe something funny, or a good film. At the moment I'm loving 'The Big Bang Theory' and 'House' which I have on DVD. I love socialising with friends and family. I suffered burnout a few years ago so I have had to learn to make time for myself, to do my self-hypnosis and have regular power naps. The importance of a daily dose of laughter is essential in my opinion.

VITAL: Would you encourage today's dental nurses to pursue a career in dental therapy or hygiene/therapy?

CM: Definitely. I would say that dental nurses make the best therapists and hygienists. They already know what the job will entail and have developed some patient management skills. However, I don't like the term hygiene/therapy – there is no such qualification.

'ABOVE ALL I AM THE MOST PROUD OF MY TWO SONS AND WHAT THEY HAVE ACHIEVED. BEING A SINGLE PARENT IS HARD, AND HOLDING DOWN SEVERAL JOBS AT THE SAME TIME ISN'T EASY, BUT IT'S WORTH IT IN THE END.'

VITAL: Looking back at your career so far, are you proud of what you have achieved?

CM: Very proud. My biggest achievement was being accepted onto the UCL Postgraduate Diploma in Hypnosis Applied to Dentistry. Until I was offered a place, only doctors, dentists, psychologists and some professionals allied to medicine had been accepted. Now dental care professionals are included. Completing my Trainer Training for the International Neuro-Linguistic Programming Association was also a personal high. It was probably one of the most challenging and exhausting things I have ever done. Above all I am the most proud of my two sons and what they have achieved. Being a single parent is hard, and holding down several jobs at the same time isn't easy, but it's worth it in the end.

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