

personal account



'The first orthodontic therapists

'We want to make a difference to patients' lives'

Melanie Bubb

describes her elation at becoming one of the first orthodontic therapists in the UK.



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Making history

On 23 July 2007 at Leeds Dental Institute, ten orthodontic dental nurses from all over the country met for the first time to embark on a ground-breaking and historical new course. Under the close guidance and supervision of the two course directors, Simon Littlewood and Trevor Hodge, the dental nurses went through a four-week intensive core course from which they would take their new found skills and knowledge and apply them in their workplaces. These ten nurses were to become the first ever orthodontic therapists in the UK.

Specialising in orthodontics

I trained as a dental nurse at the Eastman Dental Hospital in 1989 and gained both the hospital and national qualifications in 1991. Since then I have been working in orthodontics. After a year off to work in Australia and

orthodontic practice in London, I returned to the Eastman as a senior nurse in charge of educating student dental nurses. I have always loved teaching the students and gave them tutorials and lectures in my favourite subject: orthodontics.

Since qualifying as a dental nurse in 1991, I had heard about the possibility of one day becoming an Orthodontic Auxiliary (as they were then called) and, at the time, they said it would probably happen in the next couple of years. Earlier this year, just as I was losing all hope of the course ever becoming a reality, I received an email from a consultant colleague of mine telling me of a course that was starting in July. I attended an open day on the course in March and my enthusiasm was reignited. I applied with my potential trainer with whom I had worked in practice for a number of years and who was also very keen for orthodontic therapists to become a part of the dental team.

'I had waited 18 years to do this course'



Fierce competition

I was over the moon when I found out I had been successful in my application. It was an arduous and stressful few weeks during the practice visit and interview process. I felt honoured to have been accepted on the course as it is the first one of its kind in the country and the competition was fierce. I had waited 18 years for the moment.

I was not the only one. My fellow students were Anne Wiggins, Yvonne Barber, Carol Bentley, Lisa Woodin, Becky Shanks, Sara Calder and Dawn Lee from the north of England, Evelyn Baird from Scotland and Sophie Noske who comes from the south of England like me.

During the four-week course we took impressions of each other's teeth, cast up models of our teeth and then had removable appliances made on these models. We learnt how to fit

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these removable appliances, as well as learning to place fixed appliances. Initially we learnt to place fixed appliances on models, then on typodonts (the orthodontic equivalent of a phantom head), then each other and finally on live patients. We had problem-based learning scenarios, seminars, lectures, quizzes and interactive teaching sessions, and generally had great fun and worked really hard. We also covered important topics such as ethics, professionalism, communication and medical emergencies.

Life-changing

I can't believe how much we fitted in during the course, and for me it was life changing. I was on a rollercoaster of emotions – the first week we were excited and raring to go, and by the second week, reality had started to kick in – we are actually going to have to do this to real people! The third week was particularly emotional due to a combination of fatigue (from all the information we had had to take in) and a little bit of fear as the end of the four weeks approached. At the end of the fourth week we were sad to leave each other, but suddenly prepared and ready for what lay ahead in our workplaces – as an orthodontic therapist.

We have now been back at work for over four weeks and have kept in constant contact with each other to share experiences and offer support.

We are always supervised by our trainers and other orthodontic staff for every patient, but we can be asked to do anything from taking alginate impressions and placing separators to placing brackets and bands and taking fixed appliances off. We have to make a logbook of every patient that we see and get each patient checked and the logbook signed after each visit. We have periodical assessments with our trainers and a weekly tutorial to keep up the theoretical side of our training. It is very intensive, but I know that all ten of us are working hard, continuously learning and enjoying every minute of it. We all feel the same; we love orthodontics and want to make a difference to patients' lives.

A career pathway

Soon we begin our monthly visits back to Leeds for further training and feedback from our tutors. It is hard, and every day is different – each day has highs and lows. We are constantly studying and learning, working

The Yorkshire Orthodontic Therapy Course

The 2008 orthodontic therapy course comprises a four week core course then ten additional study days based at Leeds Dental Institute, combined with workplace training in an approved orthodontic practice or hospital orthodontic practice. The local specialist orthodontist or hospital consultant acts as the workplace trainer.

After completion of the course the student can apply to sit for the Diploma in Orthodontic Therapy exam.

Applicants for the course have to be a qualified dental nurse, hygienist or therapist, or a technician with appropriate clinical experience.

There are 12 places available on the course, which will start on 21 July 2008 and cost £10,000. Applications must be received by 14 December 2007.

More information and an application pack can be found at www.rcseng.ac.uk/fds/courses/orthotherapy.html, or you can email fdseducation@rcseng.ac.uk.

Registration

The GDC is currently working with training providers but has yet to approve the qualifications required for registration as an orthodontic therapist.

towards the Royal College of Surgeon's examination, that we will take in July next year, at the end of the year long course.

Orthodontics is a great dental speciality to be working in. As a dental nurse I enjoyed building up a rapport with the patients and parents and making their trip to the orthodontist a pleasant one. Seeing patients every month and watching their smile improving with each adjustment has a great sense of achievement and to have a more 'hands on' role now makes it all the more rewarding.

As a new discipline in dentistry, orthodontic therapists will have a great impact on the delivery of orthodontics in the UK. With statutory registration taking place as we speak, dental nurses are earning the professional recognition they deserve. Orthodontic therapy is a career pathway open to those who show a commitment to their patients and to the profession as a whole, and is the way forward for those who love orthodontics as much as I do.

'Watching a patient's smile improve with each adjustment has a great sense of achievement'

