

# 'My team *respect* each other's skills and abilities'

**Julie Ferry** found out why senior dental technician Ashley Hunt was awarded for distinguished service.

**A**sk any innovator to describe themselves and you will probably be greeted by a deafening silence. Given the opportunity to define their role in a groundbreaking project, the people that drove it forwards, coming up with a plethora of ideas, will find it difficult to express themselves. That is exactly what happens when I ask Ashley Hunt, senior dental technician in the Department of Oral and Dental Science at Bristol University Dental Hospital and winner of the 'Award to an Orthodontic Technician for Distinguished Service' by the British Orthodontic Society, the same question.

'The fact that my consultants felt sufficiently impressed with my work to put me forward as a worthwhile candidate for the award was very pleasing,' he manages after a considered pause. 'Then for two other groups of people, namely the judges, to feel I was an ideal candidate was really moving,' he continues with characteristic modesty.

Ashley earned the award for his contribution to the teaching of orthodontic technicians and dental graduates both locally and nationally. He designed a CAL interactive programme and a database, which is now used for monitoring the teaching of orthodontics and other disciplines in several dental schools in the UK.

His database, Laboratory DataMaster, has several functions. The two most important areas are the running and costing of the laboratory service with any number of clinics and laboratories, and secondly the detailed recording of clinical dental work by students as they use the laboratory service.

Ashley explained that before the database was developed it was very difficult to monitor what a student was doing on a day-by-day basis until the end of term when the student handed in their patient sheets detailing their lab work. It was therefore impossible to see which students were not applying themselves, or, in a few cases, overloading the lab with their own work.

'Most commercial lab databases record the

dentist and the clinic or surgery, but teaching hospitals also need to know the student supervisor as well as the student and which year of the course they are in. This database is able to look at the work of an individual student over a term or for the whole of their course progress in any lab discipline, whether orthodontics or fixed and removable prosthodontics. It can, among other functions, show if a patient is being delayed or not progressing to completion.

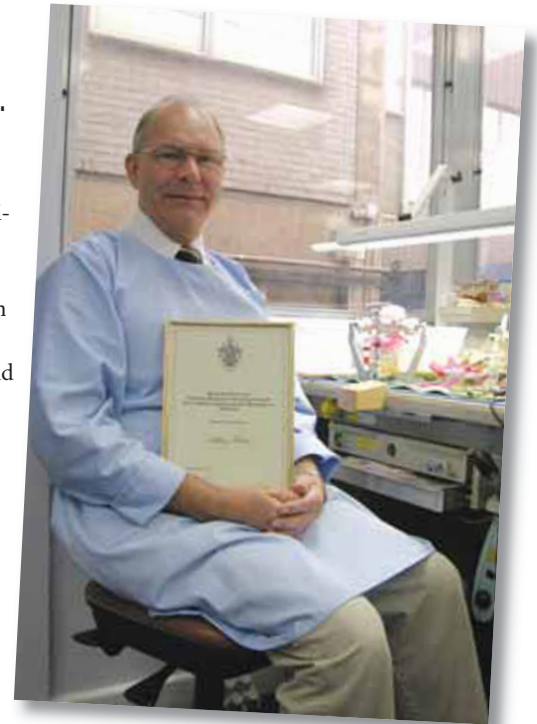
'It has certainly got the students here paying more attention to their lab work when they know tutors can check up on their progress in seconds,' he adds. And it's been good for the overall department too, as the money Ashley has earned from the sale of the databases is being used to support technician colleagues with their training or with the funds to attend conferences.

Ashley's career as a technician began in 1963 when he joined Bristol City Health Department as an apprentice technician. In 1972 he gained the City and Guilds Advanced Certificate in Orthodontics. He moved to the South West Regional Training laboratory in 1977 when the lab opened. This ran for 14 years and on its closure he moved to the University of Bristol Dental School, Department of Oral and Dental Science where he became involved with the teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate students in orthodontics.

Ashley admits he almost didn't receive the prize.

'Actually receiving the award nearly went pear shaped because somebody forgot to tell me I'd got it until about a week beforehand,' he shares. 'I got a phone call telling me to make sure I was at the conference on that day before 10am. I said, "Where is it" and they said "Harrogate" and I was down in Bristol. Apparently I should have been notified weeks before. It was a mad rush to find some accommodation but the British Orthodontic Society were very good and found something for me.'

Ashley clearly enjoys his work and his working environment. Barely a minute goes by



during our interview without him interjecting with a nugget of information about his colleagues or the department.

'We are very lucky at Bristol because we have a very close relationship with the clinical side of the department. If there is a problem they will come to us and ask how they can change things. We are given the opportunity to come up with our own ideas and put them forward. We have a dialogue going on so we aren't just stuck in a little box down the road. We are a real team – we respect each other's skills and abilities and that doesn't always happen everywhere.'

After a career spent in the NHS he does admit to facing some challenges.

'Other areas of the NHS that get involved in our work and don't understand the processes carefully are a problem sometimes. Hospital managers in particular often don't understand the nuances of dentistry. On the surface each discipline may seem all the same but of course it isn't and it takes time to fully appreciate it.'

With somebody like Ashley leading the list of innovators in dentistry I'm sure it will only be a matter of time before he overcomes this particular challenge. Like other problems he's faced, he will quickly find a solution.