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# Man with a plan

Boasting over 400 friends and his own group on Facebook, Ali Parker knows how to have a good time. But why does the self-confessed 'oral surgery boy' love dental nursing? asked **Kate Maynard.**



How many times have I heard "you have an easy job just sitting there with that sucker thing", says Alistair Parker when asked how he thinks dental nurses are viewed by the general public. 'When I explain just exactly what my job involves, I am sure the majority of people are shocked to find out that we do a heck of a lot!'

Not only does 25-year-old dental nurse Ali have to contend with views like this, but with being male in what is seen as a female role. He is often asked 'when are you going to be a dentist?' by patients in the London clinics and hospitals where he works, and as he says, female dental nurses are unlikely to be asked the same question.

But this is one individual whose enthusiasm for dental nursing could not be swayed by casual comments. Lancashire lad Ali, who grew up in the little market town of Chorley near Preston, had his eye on a career as a dental nurse from an early age.

'When I was 14 years old I was referred to

my local orthodontist. On my second visit there was a girl there with a name badge that said "Trainee Dental Nurse" and I asked her what it meant. Six months down the line I asked my GDP about dental nursing and he suggested that I do my work experience at his practice.'

Ali took to dental nursing from his very first day of work experience.

'It was amazing; there was so much going on and so much to do! The patients were lovely and my GDP and his wife – also a GDP in the same practice – were so helpful and offered me so much guidance.' Not only that, but he was immediately made to feel like an equal member of the team. On his last day, the team held a farewell party at lunchtime and Ali took a huge home-made chocolate cake in to work to express his gratitude. The icing on the cake for Ali was when his GDP asked him to come back to work with them.



Ali (left) with fellow dental nurse Helen Moore and VDP Alex Walker

'So the rest is history,' says Ali, with glee. He admits that he couldn't finish school fast enough to get out there dental nursing. At 16 he moved to Leeds to start his training at Leeds Dental Hospital but later moved to Harrogate and continued his training at Newcastle Dental Hospital.

'At Newcastle I studied under the diligence of the Senior Dental Nurse Tutor Lynn Nichol, with whom I had a fantastic rapport. I am NVQ qualified and have also completed additional NVQs including Oral Healthcare Support and Care and Operating Department Support.'

Ali came to see Harrogate as his second home and misses it greatly since moving to West London in 2006. Today he works as an Agency Dental Nurse with the Southern Cross Dental Agency. Characteristically, Ali has more praise for the staff at Southern Cross: 'not only do they find me really good agency jobs that suit me really well but they are always there to chat about anything and really make time for me.'

Ali enjoys working in a hospital environment the most and considers his main strengths to be oral and maxillofacial surgery and orthodontics.

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on my feet and gives me real job satisfaction,' he says. Currently he splits his time between a general hospital dental wing and a Community Dental Service doing a paedodontic GA list. He is glad to have acquired a wealth of experience in the CDS as particularly enjoys working with children and adults with special needs.

It is clear that Ali cares a great deal about his patients and gives 100% in every task he undertakes. When he's not in the surgery he volunteers as a fully warranted Leader with the Scouts, in the Cubs section, after having been in Scouts himself since the age of five.

'There hasn't been a more important time for young people to be involved with activities such as the Scouts with all of the headlines we hear about knife crime, gangs and underage pregnancies,' says Ali. 'Scouts provides an exciting diversion from all of this, helping

young people to become responsible adults.' Ali thoroughly enjoys being a leader, not just helping the children but also taking part in activities such as archery, sailing and camping. He is also a keen horse rider and says that if he won the lottery, he'd buy his own stables and set up a horse riding school for underprivileged children.

So Ali is a bit of a role model in more ways than one. He is so determined to promote male dental nursing that he has set up his own group on Facebook, the popular social networking site, encouraging fellow male dental nurses to speak up and be proud of their careers in dentistry. It can only be a matter of time before more of the 346 male dental nurses currently registered with the GDC join.

'I would thoroughly recommend dental nursing as a career to other men,' insists Ali. 'There is this perception that it is a very feminine role but why accept that? There are plenty of male dental nurses; the armed forces for a start have numerous men working as dental nurses.' He is also keen to add that oral surgery, one of his favoured areas of dentistry, is very much considered the 'tough side of dentistry'!

Ali is, however, aware that dental nursing as a whole is still in its infancy as a career. He is certain that statutory registration will change its reputation and make dental nursing much

more attractive over the next decade.

Ali is fortunate enough to have had the support of his friends and family ever since his first day working in a dental practice: 'My friends know that I love my job and think that it's really cool,' he explains. 'My family have been very supportive over the years; there have been moments where I've thought "sod this, I'm leaving dentistry" and they've convinced me to stick it out – which I am so grateful for now! All of my friends and family know that my job is totally different from one day to the next and that I'm not just sat around all day.'

In the long term Ali has ambitions to move into teaching and assessing in the hospital environment, part-time, while also continuing his clinical work. With Ali's passion for life and dedication to dentistry, this is one man with an impressive plan.