

# ‘As dental professionals we should be looking at the whole person’

New BSDHT President Marina Harris sees herself less as a figurehead and more as one member of an influential team, says **Kate Maynard**.

## Becoming President

‘It is an honour to be the voice for your profession,’ says Marina Harris, new President of the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy (BSDHT, formerly BDHA). ‘Although you’re the President you’re also part of the BSDHT team – a lot of people are involved and together we aim to deliver the objectives of the society.’

Marina’s involvement with the BSDHT goes back a long way. Originally a member, she was treasurer of the Thames Valley Group for four years and was then approached to become treasurer of the Executive Committee – before being elected as President-elect in November 2006. The same month, Michael Wheeler became BDHA President and was interviewed in the winter issue of *Vital*.<sup>1</sup>

‘Mike Wheeler has really involved me the last two years,’ says Marina. ‘We have attended a lot of events and meetings together so now that I am President it doesn’t feel as though I’m starting something new.’

## 28 years in dentistry

Marina came to work in the dental industry by accident. It was her ambition to join the RAF, and when she applied at 17, the dental branch needed recruits. She started off as a dental nurse in 1980 and four years later discovered the profession of dental hygienist and completed a Diploma in Dental Hygiene. Continuing in the RAF, she did some tutoring in the late 1980s/early 1990s before leaving and



moving into general practice.

‘After 15 years in practice I really wanted to be a tutor but it was difficult travelling to London to work,’ says Marina. ‘Then an opportunity came up in Portsmouth two years ago which was ideal.’

Currently Marina works part-time as a Dental Hygienist/Therapist Tutor at the University of Portsmouth’s School of Professionals Complementary to Dentistry. She supervises the perio aspect of teaching in clinic and teaches nurses, hygienists and hygienist-therapists in the classroom. She also does locum work three days a week.

Marina finds her work rewarding in a number of ways. In her role as tutor she enjoys being able to pass on her knowledge and experience to students. She can also put into practice her training in law and ethics, having completed a Masters degree in Legal Aspects of Medical Practice.

'Working in general practice, on the other hand, I like the achievement of behavioural change,' says Marina. She was impressed with dental hygienist Bobby Keeling who featured in the autumn issue of *Vital*, who has trained as a hypnotherapist to help her patients quit smoking.<sup>2</sup> Marina thinks it is unfortunate that although in situations such as this hypnotherapy is a part of dentistry – as the hygienist using hypnotherapy wants the patient to quit for reasons associated with their dental and systemic health – it is not considered by the industry as the *practice* of dentistry.

### Scope of practice

Marina echoes the thoughts of Mike Wheeler<sup>1</sup> in that she thinks that hygienists and hygienist-therapists could be more closely involved in holistic care of the patient, such as smoking cessation advice, dietary counselling and blood pressure monitoring.

'In our role as dental professionals we should be looking at the whole person,' says Marina. 'So much is related. We're guilty of only seeing the oral cavity and that's it. There is so much evidence of the links between oral health and systemic health. We could be part of a preventive mechanism so that we can pick up problems in their early stages, such as diabetes.'

The BSDHT believe that the skills of each member of the dental team should be used fully and recognised by the team leader. If DCPs' skills are utilised to the full and large practices consider employing a hygienist or hygienist-therapist instead of another dentist, it should also be more cost effective.

### Status and remit

So what are Marina's views on the current status of hygienists and hygienist-therapists in the UK?

'Within practice dental hygienists are recognised and many patients are referred to them. On the therapist side, however, there is still some confusion among dentists with regard to therapists' remit,' says Marina. 'Perhaps study groups could be created where dental therapists get out there and explain to dentists just what they do. The confusion about the role of dental therapist leads to the worry that their skills lie dormant as they aren't fully used.'

Dual qualifications in dental hygiene and therapy were first introduced in the early

Noughties, and are now the order of the day. A standalone hygiene course exists in Bristol but students can stay on for a further six months to learn the therapy element. On most current courses students learn hygiene and restorative skills alongside each other.

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### The association

The BDHA was set up almost 60 years ago and is now a nationally recognised body representing over 2,500 members. The BSDHT represents their members at national level, particularly in the political arena, support members on issues which affect their working lives, listen to members and respond accordingly, and boast 12 reasons for dental hygienists and hygienist-therapists to join on their website (see box).

As ambassador for the society, Marina plans to continue with the work of the previous and current executive teams.

'We have a strategic five year plan and obviously new issues will come along as well,' says Marina. 'We will continue to lobby for change in areas that we feel are important and achieve satisfaction for our members by responding to their needs. We are driven by what our members really want us to do.' Through networking with other associations such as the GDC and the BDA, Marina and the rest of the BSDHT can inform their members about what is happening. It can of course be difficult to keep up-to-date when you're out there in practice, explains Marina. She will also dedicate time to building rapport with other health

professionals and the companies that support dental hygienists and hygienist-therapists.

### The future

Marina's vision for the future is of a dental team where an appointment with a dental professional looks beyond the oral cavity and views a patient as a whole, a team where the skills of all team members can be used in areas such as blood pressure, diabetes screening, stress counselling, smoking cessation, diet and nutrition analysis, as well as oral health education and oral hygiene instruction.

Marina also has a personal interest in research in primary dental care and would like to undertake research in practice as opposed to in a laboratory. She believes that going beyond anecdotal evidence could help a majority of patients.

One thing's for sure, once Marina's two-year term as President of the BSDHT comes to an end, this is one DCP who won't be resting on her laurels.

1. Bajaj A. Heralding a hygienic future. *Vital* winter 2006; 28-29.
2. Keeling B. Sensational smoking cessation. *Vital* autumn 2008; 30-35.

### BSDHT member benefits

1. *Dental Health* journal six times per year with CPD.
2. Member newsletter.
3. Advice sheets.
4. Insurance and financial products.
5. Annual conference with special member rates.
6. CPD regionally and nationally and a CPD portfolio on joining.
7. Tax relief on your annual subscription.
8. A legal helpline 24/7.
9. Information by email or telephone.
10. A website [www.bscht.org.uk](http://www.bscht.org.uk) with discussion forum and latest news.
11. Influence: the BSDHT influences change by dialogue with the leading organisations within dentistry.
12. Online shopping!

For more information on BSDHT membership, call 01452 886365 or email [enquiries@bscht.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bscht.org.uk).