Insider’s Guide to Dentistry Work Experience

Edited By
Nausheen Siddiqui & Terrence Bosman
Author: Akhila Kotta

What I learned
I saw how the dentist interacted with different patients, and overcame any that may have been difficult to treat. I also learned about the importance of note taking and cross infection control as well as basic communication skills.
Having gone to NHS and private practice work experience I was able to note the key differences between the two in terms of time, attitude etc.

What I saw
Most of my work experience was with the NHS orthodontist in the hospital. I got to learn about occlusion, appearance and all the things that need to be taken into consideration when fitting a brace. I also got to see some work with difficult patients, for example one who had a bad gag reflex which proved difficult when taking impressions and how these were overcome.
At the private practice I saw mainly dentures, how these were made, and fixed when they were no longer suitable for the patient. I also got to see what aesthetical considerations needed to be taken.
In terms of treatment I got to see a few wisdom tooth removals, and a “tongue-tie” operation.

Moments that surprised me
The tongue tie operation was the most surprising for me. Initially the patient had a short tongue but after the cutting of the frenum of the tongue the patient was immediately able to stick out his tongue, something he said he had never been able to do before. Because of the instant result from this I was impressed.
Also when I was shown the before and after pictures of people who had worn braces (myself included) it was surprising to see the difference it made to how one looked.

Why I decided to apply for dentistry
I've always wanted to be involved in a clinical profession where I get to meet all types of people and help them improve their quality of life. Being able to see what I did and see the impact it had on the patients who were treated showed me that dentistry was something that could fulfil all my needs in a career.
As well as this I wanted to do something that I could learn more about even after I graduated, and since there are always new papers and new types of research being carried out in the dental field I felt it would be ideal as well.

Author: Alia Rizvi

I worked at a dental practice in Pakistan for one month during my summer holidays and I observed a dentist for a week in England.
I learned a great deal from both dental practices, particularly with regard to the importance of communication skills, teamwork, the extensive knowledge a dentist is required to have as well responsibility and job satisfaction.

In the practice in England, I saw crowns and bridges placed amalgam fillings and general checkups. In Pakistan I saw a great deal of root canal treatment, as well as treating a variety of dental diseases. One of the main surprises I received was that despite the difference in location of the two practices, and different languages, the skills and the treatments carried out were the same. This made me realise that dentistry is universal in its application and a very versatile career. In additions, I found it
remarkable, that each patient was a new experience to the dentist despite the fact that the procedures carried out were very similar. Furthermore, I had never realised that common medical problems gave oral symptoms and dentists were able to diagnose some general medical conditions from looking in the mouth. In addition, it was humbling to find out how much people appreciated their dentists and how essential a good dentist-patient relationship is.

My work experience confirmed for me that dentistry was a career, which gave job satisfaction, was very practical and flexible and gave job security and hence was the perfect career choice for me.

Author: Bhaven Modha

Although the Dentistry degree trains students to become general dental practitioners (GDPs), dentistry itself encompasses a wide array of specialities. Having already been accustomed to general practice during childhood visits and beyond, I wanted to experience the bigger picture; therefore I seized opportunities in varied dental avenues. Altogether, my work experience may have totalled 10 weeks, as placements were spread out and undertaken at various time intervals. My work experience included opportunities at various NHS practices. This provided me with a well-informed insight into NHS dentistry; the new contract; its demands and general busy environment; the advantages and disadvantages of being a dentist; the typical treatments on offer; the large number of daily appointments; the often demanding days which the dental team had to endure; the fact that no day was ever the same, and that the dental team had to readily deal with the unexpected.

Furthermore, the dentists saw a wide range of patients of different ethnic backgrounds, and with varying medical conditions; hence, communication and behavioural methods had to be adjusted and adapted to suit the individual patient. Behavioural methods were also employed to control anxiety in children, such as through positive reinforcement, tell-show-do and praise. During several treatments, particularly in restorative work, the dentist had to persevere and ensure complete accuracy in the cavity preparations, which required intense concentration.

I learnt that dental nurses play an integral role in the dental team. They interact positively with the patient by reassuring them and providing general chitchat. They implement high levels of cross infection and perform thorough decontamination procedures, as well as offering immediate chair side assistance to the dentist.

At one practice, the dental hygienist permitted me to help prepare instrument trays and carry out decontamination and cross infection procedures. I was also allowed to perform aspiration during scaling procedures, where positioning of this device was vital. Here, I was able to appreciate the dental hygienists role in the dental team, particularly, in the management of periodontal health, as well as in the teaching of oral hygiene practices.

At a private practice, I gained an insight into how such dentistry differs from the NHS. The atmosphere appeared much more relaxed. The dental practice established its own prices for the spectrum of dental treatments. More cosmetic treatments were on offer. Patients were much wealthier; they had higher expectations and demands for their treatment. Many had researched their proposed treatments on the internet, and were knowledgeable. As opinions differed, this occasionally resulted in a minor disagreement between certain patients and the dentist. Again, good interpersonal communication skills were shown to be essential.
With the extra charges, the private dentist was entitled to much longer appointments with patients, enabling enhanced discussion and explanations of treatment options. Patients received well-explained documentation on the treatment they had received, as well as on proposed treatments. The dental treatments I had witnessed during my NHS and private placements included: composite and amalgam restorations; denture fittings and adjustments; general checkups; periodontal root debridements/scaling treatment; radiographic analyses; crown placements, and impression material preparation and impression taking. Exclusively with private practice, I observed endodontic/root canal procedures; consultations for tooth whitening procedures; an implant placement with subsequent suturing; checkups; and cosmetic composite restorations. During my time at a hospital based oral-maxillofacial surgery department, I spent time shadowing patient consultations between an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, and the referred patients. Many of the cases pertained to oral pathology, where patients presented with pathological lesions. Problem solving and differential diagnoses were imperative when coming to a conclusion. I learnt that high levels of smoking and alcohol consumption have a higher causative link to the development of oral cancerous lesions. Moreover, some situations were highly sensitive, where specific patients received a grim diagnosis.

The surgeon also supervised a team of Senior House Officers (SHOs), which gave me the chance to see their line of work. On one occasion, I spent a whole afternoon shadowing a SHO, as she performed complex wisdom teeth extractions.

With the orthodontics placement, I observed the placement, adjustment and removal of braces. The experience made me realise how certain dental conditions can have negative impacts on a patient’s self esteem, and how dentistry also plays a significant role in improving the aesthetic, facial appearance. On some occasions, it was a pleasant experience to share the patient’s satisfying moment when their braces were finally removed. There were visible improvements in the alignment and positioning of the teeth, as compared to previous casted models and patient photography. My final placement at a dental technician’s laboratory was worthwhile. It showed me the processes of denture construction, and revealed the significance of this professional’s work in the production of dental prosthetics.

You will need to seek prior permission from the practice manager, senior surgeon, dentist-in-charge or other relevant persons before you can embark on the work experience. It would be wise to send a speculative letter to the concerning individual. Many may refuse or be reluctant. This is because there are strict issues relating to patient confidentiality, and many patients may experience dental anxiety, and wish for privacy. Dental schools may stipulate requirements on the type and amount of work experience, thus you must be aware of such criteria before you apply. You must adhere to their guidelines, and explain the duration accordingly on your personal statement.

During any form of dental work experience, dress smartly and behave professionally. Be enthusiastic, observant and eager to learn. Converse with patients and speak to members of the dental team. Talk to the dentist about their experiences and ask relevant questions. Use your initiative and offer help when required.

Keep a notebook and take notes. Read patient leaflets, for instance, those on dental caries, periodontal disease, and oral hygiene, among others, and have a look at any important literature, for example, those on the practice’s procedures on cross infection policies, amalgam safety, and denture care.
At the end of my work experience, my decision to pursue dentistry was finalised. I had thoroughly enjoyed each and every moment and learnt a great deal from those around me. The challenging environment; the responsibilities; the ability to teach, advise and help the patient; the prospects of continually learning, enhancing skills and managing a business; the capacity to use your knowledge to relieve pain and prevent problems, as well as to diagnose dental and general health conditions; the chance to utilise artistic flare in intricate hands on work; the opportunity to manage and lead a team; the ability to build good rapport with patients, as well as several other reasons, completely compelled me to the profession. I could fully envisage myself undertaking the role of a dental surgeon.

Having nearly completed two years of dental school, the interview and application process, has become a long, distant memory. As foreseen, the course requires hard work, commitment and organisation. I wish you the best of luck in your application to dental school.

Author: Helen Moynihan

The main difficulty with dental work experience was actually finding a dental practice to go to. I tried my own dentist as well as all my local dental practices and they all said I had to be over 18. I eventually found a contact through my careers advisor at school, who knew a dentist who previous students had done work experience with. He owned a private practice but had recently moved from an NHS practice, so I managed to get some work shadowing done at both. He also gave me the contact of his friend who was a dentist specialising in dental implants, which I found the most interesting.

I learnt by shadowing several different dentists the importance of team work in practice. I also saw that patients could be very demanding, particularly so in the private practice and that the dentist had to find ways to deal with this. I learnt that dentistry can be very stressful, perhaps due to time constraints in the NHS practice, and because the outcome of dental treatment isn’t always successful.

I was lucky that most of the dentists I shadowed talked me through the treatments they were carrying out. I watched root canal treatments, composite and amalgam restorations, a dentist dealing with trauma to a central incisor, periodontal treatment (root surface debridement) and I also watched dental implants being fitted, in the various stages.

A lot of what you see might just be check-ups, especially if you go in the school holidays. When there is an interesting case, pay attention and make some notes so you can talk about it in your interview(s).

I decided to apply for dentistry after my work experience mainly because after watching dentists at work I felt like it would be something I would enjoy and that I could be good at. I realised that it would be difficult sometimes, for example if a treatment goes wrong, or if a patient is anxious or angry, but I was excited to face these challenges. I knew I didn’t want a job that would be the same every day and I could see that this definitely wouldn’t be the case if I chose to become a dentist.
Insider’s guide to Dentistry Work experience
EDITED BY TERRENCE BOSMAN

Author: Katy-Ann Rowe

I did two forms of work experience before I applied to UCAS.

1. My local dental practice where I observed some routine examinations, scale and polish, extraction of primary teeth and extraction of an erupted, carious upper third molar.
2. At Cardiff dental hospital where I was lucky enough to go on four separate week long sessions of work experience. I attended all the different clinics available as well as some maxillofacial surgery, trauma in A&E and numerous student seminars and lectures/case presentations. (Clinics attended were periodontal, oral medicine, extraction, oral surgery, paediatrics, restorative and orthodontics)

I learnt a huge amount from my experiences at Cardiff, and felt very lucky to have been able to do this as it gave me huge confidence in my interviews as well as confirming my decision to become a dentist. I think that had I not attended Cardiff for work experience I would not have been aware of all the different specialities of dentistry and how much can be hospital based. However, in order to see and treat your patient as an individual, it is important not to become used to breaking down dentistry into set clinics!

Author: Sajedah Shubib

Work experience is so vital when deciding a career such as dentistry. You need to see it to understand its true nature and whether it’s your thing. I did one month of work experience in a general dental practise, where I observed a range of dental treatments including crowning, composite fillings, extractions and root canal treatment.

After my first month experience, I had an overview of what my day-to-day life would be as a dentist, and everything that this career would encompass. I came to appreciate that dentistry was much more than teeth, but involves a lot of patient interaction. It’s an art, in clinical terms as well behavioral. Dentists are often portrayed negatively in the media and this consequently impacts patients’ dental care. Dental health can’t be underestimated. I have come to realize that one’s appearance of teeth can significantly affect ones confidence, especially for women.

My work experience taught me a lot about being a competent dentist. With a good professional attitude and approach to patients, much of the negativity dentists receive could be minimized.
Author: Vinay Mistry

My dental work experience began with the shadowing of general dental practitioners, but later evolved into working with these dentists during their day-to-day procedures.

In 2007 (the summer before starting A2 of the A-levels and applying to universities) I attained work experience in two NHS/private dental practices, but involvement was minimal due to health & safety and GDC regulations. Due to my unsuccessful application, I decided to take a gap year to consolidate my commitment to dentistry, and received an offer to work as a dental nurse in one of the general practices I had previously shadowed in. The areas of experience were numerous but included: periodontics, paedodontics, prosthodontics, endodontics, as well as other facets found in a general dental practice. The aspects I would have otherwise liked to experience would be oral surgery, orthodontics and especially implantodontics.

Not only did I learn vast amounts about dentistry itself, but I also learnt about the working environment and developed the skills necessary to maintain the karma within the profession. There were moments that surprised me, as mentioned in my personal statement, but the most surprising instance initially was the epiphany of dentistry’s complexity and the assortment of expertise required.

I knew I wanted to apply for dentistry as it incorporated all of the things I’m fascinated by with the proficiency I possess. A scientific basis was always going to be the central core to my career, but in conjunction with a knack of artistry and working with people helped to converge my attention to this career-path.

Author: Andrew Geddis

I was strongly advised to get at least two weeks of work experience, preferably in different settings. Following this advice, I spent one week in a private practice and a second week in an NHS centre focusing on special needs individuals. The variation between the two settings was very interesting as it highlighted the wide range of individuals and situations that could be presented to a dentist.

Treatments seen varied massively from simple check-ups on adults and children, to a three-unit bridge removal due to gum disease, which was due to be replaced by a partial denture. The opportunity allowed more to be learnt about dentistry in a short time than I thought would be possible. In the NHS practice there were large gaps in time when patients did not attend their appointments.

This gave me a great opportunity to chat to the dentist and obtain their advice on the career and interviews leading into it. Their advice helped shape my personal statement and was invaluable in the interview setting.

Surprises mainly came during the start of my first placement. There was an extremely anxious patient in whose treatment I saw exceptional communication skills from the dentist which appeared crucial for providing effective treatment. I had not seen such extreme dental anxiety first-hand before. Surprising also, was the variation in what patients expected from their dentist.

Following work experience, I was sure that dentistry was the career for me. The time in practices had enabled me to see pain alleviated, broken smiles restored and the effects of trauma resolved – doing that every day seemed like a great career. Seeing the combination of scientific knowledge and clinical skills combined in patient treatment was continually interesting and I had no doubt that dentistry would be a fascinating career to pursue.
Author: Krinal Kausik Patel

My work experience was great. I saw many different techniques by many dentists, both in private and NHS health care. I saw a wide range of procedures including extractions, crown preparation, implants and orthodontic treatments. I was educated in pharmacological methods of anxiety control and pain management, observing both an anaesthetist and the dentist. I was surprised in the artistry that was needed in dentistry, whether it be carving a perfect composite restoration, shade matching or painting stain into fissures on porcelain crowns. This aspect of dentistry really excited me. As well as the enjoyment from being creative with the science behind the practise, the sense of reward I detected from the dentists after providing function, and even aesthetics back to a patient, is what tipped me over the edge to apply.