

Did I choose the right career?

Young Dentist of the Year award winner **Nilesh Parmar** offers some advice for young dentists entering the profession

IT'S STRANGE that at the tender age of 17 we are expected to know what we want to do for the rest of our lives. There are so many other things going on at that age, we are not into adulthood yet, but despite this, we are given the choice to make big life-changing decisions. I used to envy my friends who did degrees in maths or economics; they could finish their degree and get a job in almost any industry. Their degree may be in maths, but their job maybe in marketing! As a dentist, you are more or less, on a set path, you are trained to do one thing, and those skills don't train you for much else.

Dentistry is not an easy course to get on to. I shudder to think what would happen to me if I was 18 and having to do my A-levels again, I am not sure I would get the grades needed to get into dental school now. I think it must be 'AAAA' by now? Going back a few years, I remember sitting on the interview admissions panel at university, having these young fresh-faced would-be dentists walk in,

Dr Nilesh R Parmar

BDS MSc MSc was voted Best Young Dentist in the East of England in 2009 and runner up in 2010. He was short-listed at the Private Dentistry Awards in the category of Outstanding Individual 2011. Nilesh has master's degrees in Prosthetic Dentistry from the Eastman Dental Institute and a master's degree in Clinical Implantology from Kings College London. Nilesh is one of the few dentists in the UK to have a degree from all three London Dental Schools and is currently studying for his third MSc in Orthodontics. His main area of interest is in dental implants and CEREC CAD/CAM technology. Nilesh runs a five-surgery practice close to London and is a visiting implant dentist to two central London practices. Nilesh was voted the 8th Most Influential Person in UK dentistry by Dentistry magazine 2012, the youngest person in the top ten.
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sit down and tell us how dentistry was all they ever wanted to do. How they were 100% sure that a life fixing teeth is what they aspire to! They came with perfect grades, high achievers, great sportspeople and many came along with 'examples' of manual dexterity. All very impressive, but how do you know what would make a good dentist? Personally, I don't think any of us know, it's all very subjective, we all have our strengths and weaknesses in dentistry, nobody is awesome at everything.

What do you want from life?

So in writing this article, I tried to think what I would have liked to know when I was in your position, as an undergraduate, VT or newly qualified dentist. My first question would be; what do you want from life? Do you want to work a few days a week, have a simple clinical workload and enjoy other things? If you do, then that's great, it means that your career will probably be the smoothest and least stressful out of all of us, and I envy you. If, however, you wish to be a high flyer, place veneers, whack in implants and do all sorts of fantastic treatments; my advice to you would be to slow down!

If you look at all the great and successful dentists out there, they all know what their strengths are, and they stick to them. We all spent a lot of time doing the work nobody else wanted to do, it's important to put the time in, to get your basics right. I have come across many young dentists who are planning 12-unit veneer cases, but they have failed to diagnose caries. Yes, the fancy cases will come, along with the satisfaction of tackling them, but you need to make sure your basics are correct.

I remember when I had just finished VT and felt that my oral surgery abilities weren't very good. Seeing an XLA on the day list used to worry me, I would mentally check that there would be some other dentists around in case I ran into trouble. I was always worried about nerves, mental nerves, ID nerves! I decided that I had to do something about it so I did a house job in oral surgery, then I made sure that

I booked in as many extractions as I could in practice. Now I get a lot of satisfaction in being the dentist that other dentists call when they can't get a tooth out. It wasn't easy to get here, it took a lot of work, but it was definitely worth it!

Decisions, decisions

To the undergraduates reading this, I would like to say, don't worry! I know it all sounds like doom and gloom, but you are about to qualify and become a dentist, it's a profession where you will always have a job - have you ever met an unemployed dentist? I haven't! The job security inherent with this profession is fantastic and we are all very lucky to be doing what we do.

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There are a myriad of possibilities: hospital, community, research, practice, NHS, private, specialise (the list goes on). It's not my place to tell you what direction to take, but it would make sense to qualify, work a few years in practice, a year in hospital then re-evaluate which path you want to go down. Every discipline has its own rewards and pitfalls, but ultimately it's up to you to choose.

My career path is a bit different to the usual. I qualified in 2004 from Queen Mary University and really didn't enjoy my time there (from a dental side, of course). It was stressful, I had requirements to contend with, and people were being forced to retake exams. Life was suddenly becoming very serious and real. However, my reflection of this time is that the undergraduate years are great; I just didn't make the most of them. If I knew then what I know now I would have worked a lot harder to get more out of the course and the system. Maybe then I wouldn't have had a last-minute dash to get my dentures finished for finals (I hated making dentures, more on that later.) Luckily, once you qualify, things are much better. It's not as hectic



Niles Parmar at the 2009 Dentistry Awards

and you get paid to do what you were doing at university for free! It takes a bit of getting used to, dare I say some of us get used to it quicker than others.

Moving on to MSc...

After I had finished my VT I went onto do a one-year stint as a senior house officer in oral surgery and restorative dentistry. Working here changed my outlook on things, I decided I wanted to learn more, and go on to do some formal training, perhaps a maxillofacial job.

Unfortunately, my local general hospital didn't offer me a job, so I was left wondering what to do. After turning for advice to my consultant at King's, I phoned up the Eastman Dental Hospital to see if there were any courses available at this late stage. All that was available was an MSc in periodontics or an MSc in prosthetics. Since I didn't like making dentures and it was a weak area in my repertoire, I went for the MSc in prosthetics.

What a year that was! We were working hard, seven days a week, it was like doing fifth

year finals all over again. I can see how the Eastman got its reputation, and I can say it was a fantastic experience; I was broken down and reprogrammed the Eastman way! I recommend it to anyone who wants to learn some serious dentistry. You will need to have understanding friends and family (especially if you are in a relationship) as you won't be seeing any of them for the time you are there!

After I finished at the Eastman, I decided I wanted to combine my oral surgery and prosthetic knowledge with that of dental implants. I don't see why one dentist can't offer all the treatment a patient needs; he just needs the training and the skills. So I applied for the two-year part-time MSc in implants at King's/Guy's. I didn't get in; I wasn't offered an interview and was a bit deflated. But another man's loss is another man's gain and fortunately for me someone dropped out, I was interviewed and got the place.

Out of the four of us doing the course (the intake is only four students every two years, hence the competition in getting in) I was the youngest. Everyone else had more dental experience, but we were such a great group it made the two years fly past. Guy's has a very hands-on work ethic, we were seeing patients from day one, which I loved and the consultants are very approachable - I would definitely go back.

No pain, no gain!

Now that I've finished my MScs I am working in my own practice and in private practice in London. Focusing on work 100% has really been rewarding. Winning 'Best Young Dentist East 2009', coming in second place in 2010 and being shortlisted for the 'Outstanding Individual' award at the *Private Dentistry Awards* is a great recognition for me, especially after all the years of hard work.

After my last MSc I uttered the words: 'never again - I have had enough', but as I am a glutton for punishment, I have almost finished the first year of the MSc in orthodontics at Warwick University. It's proving to require A LOT of reading, more so than the previous MScs, but it's been enjoyable and I have promised myself that as long as my brain is still functioning I will carry on.

So did I make the right choice when I was 17, ticking that UCAS box that said 'dentistry'? I think I did, I love my work and love talking about it. It's a profession where you will never know everything; you always need to keep moving forward learning and trying new things and enjoying the satisfaction that comes with doing things well. ■