

'The perfect dental nurse is a graceful swan'

What does good dental nurse training look like? asks **Diane Cox**, a dental nurse and tutor from Absolute Dental in Devon.



Other than trips as a child to visit my own dentist, my first real first-hand experience of dental nursing was when I took a temporary job as a dental receptionist in a one-dentist practice in my hometown. The dentist and his nurse had worked together for many years, knew each other inside out and worked effectively in a muted silence. I would observe whenever possible and was fascinated to know how without a single word being exchanged, the right instrument or material was always on hand.

When I left this practice, my career took (what I considered then to be) a very different path, and I worked in sales, marketing and customer services. I was lucky enough to work within companies who excelled in the area of customer satisfaction, where going the extra mile was the norm and our customers were always our main focus.

Despite finding this work rewarding, I always longed to get back into the dental environment and after several years, I made

the decision to pursue dental nursing as my long-term career. I was able to find employment in a beautiful, private dental practice as a trainee dental nurse, where I was given training and support and gained my National Certificate in Dental Nursing qualification – passing the exam with a distinction.

It wasn't until I arrived at Absolute Dental in Kingsbridge, however, that I realised that good dental nursing skills and good customer service skills were not enough. Our Business Manager, Emma John,¹² has a very clear vision of what great customer service looks and sounds like, and this is shared with every member of the team from day one.

Emma works nationally with other dental practices offering bespoke front desk training to forward thinking dental practices to enable them to deliver excellent customer service and helping them to realise that this is as important to a practice as delivering excellence in dentistry. From her experiences within other dental practices, Emma noticed there was a lack of first rate training and support for dental nurses preparing for the National Exam,



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and absolutely no training courses existed that combined the theoretical knowledge for dental nurses whilst offering great customer service training too. So we created one!

As with Emma’s clear vision for what great customer service looks like, I too have a clear vision of what great dental nursing looks like – without the vision, you cannot be sure what you are trying to achieve! When I think of what the perfect dental nurse looks like, I picture a swan. Above the surface of the water a swan glides serenely, unflustered by its surroundings, always graceful and dedicated to caring for its signets. Meanwhile under the water, the swan’s feet must be paddling furiously to keep it afloat and moving against the tide and the swan’s mind must be active every moment of the day thinking about where the next meal can be found, keeping its family safe and its feathers white!

As dental nurses, I believe the part above the water is the part our patients should see. Always unflustered and always serene – our patients don’t need to know if we are having a bad day, or that we’re worried about when we’ll have time to set up our treatment room for the crown prep booked in next – they should be welcomed into a relaxed treatment room by a smiling, gracious dental nurse who greets the patient by name whilst introducing him or herself; changeovers should be seamless; and the patient should feel that they are the most important person in the world at that time – that we are there because we want to look after them. On the inside, our minds should be working overtime; always thinking two steps ahead of our dentists, anticipating their next request; prepared for anything; time aware; organised and most importantly, consistent.

Compare this to some of the examples of ‘bad dental nursing’ that I’ve seen, where an

unenthusiastic, vacant dental nurse is more interested in texting her boyfriend in the middle of a patient’s treatment than they are in looking after the patient (believe me - I have seen it!) or where the dental nurse is unhelpful, disrespectful and unapproachable ‘until I’ve had my 11 o’clock coffee break!’ To me these characteristics are unacceptable in our profession - and that is what we are – professionals. I always tell my trainees to try and picture all of their actions from a patient’s perspective – ‘how does the patient feel if I’m filing my nails whilst they’re waiting for local anaesthetic to work?’ or ‘how does this proud middle-aged lady feel when she dribbles her mouthwash down her front after an ID block because I didn’t help her to reach the spittoon?’ and just because you like listening to Nirvana doesn’t mean your anxious patient will find it restful (again, both real life experiences!).

So how can we turn bad into good? What makes an unenthusiastic dental nurse WANT to get more involved? Well I believe the answer is all in the training. Only when a dental nurse has a first rate understanding of dental procedures, can they really begin to anticipate the next step and be prepared for the unexpected. This is the challenge that we face on a daily basis, but you can only really enjoy it and be part of it if you know what the treatment options might be for a patient and be prepared to start any of them at a moment’s notice. I enjoy playing the ‘today - I’m going to be better than you at this’ game with my dentist. I don’t mean this to sound overconfident, but it is my personal challenge to myself every day – to be ready for what my dentist needs before they’ve even asked for it – and this is what gives me great job satisfaction and makes me think every day how much I love my job.

My good training has given me confidence in my role and this in turn leads to my happiness at work – which I know the patients sense because they often comment on it. Would you like dental nurses who are visibly happy in their work and who thrive on challenges? Let’s be honest – who wouldn’t?! That’s what we are striving to achieve at Absolute Dental Training; dental nurses who have excellent technical and theoretical knowledge, with a raised profile within the practice and who excel in customer service and who can be an asset to any modern forward thinking dental practice.

If you would like more information on the training courses provided by Absolute Dental, telephone 01548 856262 or visit www.absolute-dental.co.uk and click on the Absolute Dental Training logo.

1. Maynard K. Modern managers. *Vital* summer 2004; 44-46.
2. Maynard K. ‘I have complete confidence in my team’ *Vital* spring 2009; 26-27.