

All I Ever Dreamt of Becoming Was a Dental Decontamination Technician

(By Sandra Milford in Oxford)

Growing up, I never imagined that one day I would find myself working in a dental practice, surrounded by stainless steel instruments, titanium equipment and the organised precision that sits behind every successful dental procedure. But perhaps, in some ways, my career was always written for me.



My mother is a dentist by profession, so dentistry was something I grew up around. However, it wasn't necessarily the clinical side of dentistry that fascinated me most. I was captivated by the instruments, the stainless steel, the titanium, the meticulous process of cleaning, sterilising and preparing everything for the next patient.

That fascination eventually became a career. I chose to become a **Dental Decontamination Technician**, and five years later, I can honestly say that I have found my role incredibly rewarding. I work in a private dental clinic, although we also regularly see patients who have been referred to us through the NHS. Every day brings something different, and while my role may happen behind the scenes, I know that what I do contributes to the safety and care of every patient who walks through our doors.

Seeing Patients Leave Happier Than When They Arrived

Working in a dental practice has taught me that patients don't always arrive through the door feeling confident. Sometimes they arrive frightened. Sometimes they are embarrassed about the condition of their teeth or mouth. Sometimes they are in significant pain and simply don't know what is wrong or what can be done. As a team, we try to make sure that every patient feels supported.

There is something incredibly rewarding about watching someone walk into the practice distressed and leave knowing that they have received the help they needed. Even when treatment means they have to go home afterwards to rest and heal, there is reassurance in knowing that something has been done to address their problem.

For me, one of the most satisfying parts of working in healthcare is seeing that transformation. A patient can arrive worried, uncomfortable and unsure of what will happen next, and leave with a plan, reassurance and, in many cases, relief from pain. But five years into my career, I also discovered that working in healthcare means being prepared for things you don't necessarily expect.

The Day Everything Changed

There is one particular day that I will never forget. An elderly gentleman arrived at our practice in considerable distress and was clearly experiencing pain. He also had difficulty communicating, which made it harder for us to understand exactly what was wrong. He was late for his appointment, so while he waited for the dentist to become available, he sat in our reception area. Then something happened. All of a sudden, he started shaking. He was sweating profusely. It was the middle of a very cold winter afternoon, so seeing someone sweating so heavily immediately caught our attention.

We tried to understand what was happening, but communication was difficult. The gentleman reached into his pocket and appeared to be trying to find something. Eventually, he pulled out a bottle but accidentally dropped it on the floor. We didn't know what was inside. Then another patient sitting nearby suddenly shouted: **“He's diabetic. Those are his Glucotabs. Give him one! I use exactly the same tablets”**

Everything happened very quickly. In the panic of the moment, one of my colleagues picked up the bottle and gave the gentleman a tablet. He chewed it, and gradually, his shaking and sweating began to improve. It was only afterwards that we began to understand what had happened. The gentleman had apparently experienced **hypoglycaemia, a dangerously low blood sugar level.**

None of us had been expecting it. None of us had anticipated that while this gentleman was waiting for a dental appointment, we would suddenly find ourselves dealing with what appeared to be a diabetic emergency.

And, quite honestly, we were incredibly fortunate that another patient in the waiting room recognised the signs and knew what the tablets were for.

A Wake-up Call for All of Us

Once the gentleman was stable and able to communicate more clearly, we checked whether he needed us to contact anyone. He explained that someone was waiting outside in a car to take him home. Our practice manager, who is also the practice owner, was made aware of what had happened.

And that incident changed things for us. Afterwards, our manager encouraged all of us to undertake additional training, particularly around diabetes and the use of blood pressure machines. He made it clear that the training wasn't compulsory.

At first, I was slightly daunted by the idea. After all, I wasn't employed as a general healthcare assistant. I had chosen my career because I wanted to be a Dental Decontamination Technician. I knew my role, I enjoyed my role and I never imagined that I would need to learn about things such as diabetes monitoring or blood pressure machines. But then I thought about what had happened. What if it happened again? What if the next patient didn't have another person sitting nearby who recognised the symptoms? What if we were the only people there who could help? Those questions changed my mind.

Adding Another Skill to My Profession

So, I completed the training. And today, I'm genuinely grateful that I did.

We have many patients with diabetes who attend our practice, and thankfully, we have not experienced another incident like that one where a patient required staff intervention. But something has changed. I am now more knowledgeable about diabetes.

I now understand more about what we should look out for, and I feel much more confident about responding appropriately if a similar situation ever occurs. We have also changed our approach to patient check-in. We now ask patients whether they have diabetes and, if they do, what type. It is a simple question, but it can provide important information that helps us understand our patients better and be more prepared. Our manager's encouragement has also reminded me of something important: **healthcare never really stays inside the boundaries of your job description.**

I Never Expected to Learn This

I became a Dental Decontamination Technician because I was fascinated by the instruments. I never set out to become an expert in diabetes. I never imagined that I would learn how to use additional monitoring equipment or become more confident around blood pressure monitoring. Yet here I am. And I wouldn't change it.

Diabetes affects millions of people, and many healthcare professionals can encounter someone experiencing a problem unexpectedly. That experience made me realise how valuable additional knowledge can be, even when it isn't technically part of your original career plan. I would like to thank our manager for encouraging us to undertake regular training and for recognising that investing in staff knowledge ultimately benefits patients.

More Than Just a Job

Five years ago, all I ever dreamt of becoming was a Dental Decontamination Technician. And I still love being one. But I have learned that working in healthcare is also about being willing to learn beyond the boundaries of your immediate role. The additional training didn't take away from my profession. Instead, it added another layer to it. I now have knowledge and skills that I never imagined I would possess. And perhaps that's one of the greatest lessons healthcare has taught me: **you can have a very clear idea of the career you want, while still remaining open to becoming more than you ever expected.**

I started my journey fascinated by stainless steel and titanium instruments. Five years later, I'm still passionate about what I do. But now I also know that being part of a healthcare team means being prepared to learn, adapt and step up when a patient needs you. And for that, I will always be grateful.