

Turning a negative into a positive

Treatment coordinator **Dorina Vulpe** talks about the need to change patient perception of dentistry and why she will always be a dental nurse at heart

According to her LinkedIn page, treatment coordinator Dorina Vulpe is ‘an enthusiastic, reliable professional with excellent communication and organisational skills’.

Certainly her proactive approach to work is making a difference to the patients at the two Happy Kids Dental practices situated in London’s fashionable areas of Chelsea and Marylebone.

A problem solver with strong analytical skills, the 27-year-old former dental nurse, who qualified five years ago, has an eye for detail and it is her innovative ways of implementing new working practices that have improved efficiency for both sites that offer paediatric care to the capital’s kids.

As she says: ‘I am keen to learn and enjoy building on my existing strengths and experience and positive approach in order to further develop my career. I am currently studying for PRINCE2 certification. I love working with people and, because I had a negative dental experience in my childhood, I see this is an opportunity for me to make a difference and do the best I can to help people. I enjoy being part of a team and I very much enjoy the dental environment overall.’

Dorina joined the Happy Kids Dental team in June 2018 – a move that marked her first job as a full-time treatment coordinator.

She explains: ‘I have always been involved with the patient journey. I enjoy discussing with patients about their treatment and like spending time with them to ensure they understand the importance of dental fitness.’

‘In my opinion, the dental knowledge you gain as a dental nurse is essential and it can be a solid base platform to become a TCO and build on that knowledge. As a dental nurse, you also get to interact with patients and see how people feel about the dental treatment. I am – and always will be – a dental nurse at heart. However, this is a great career progression opportunity for dental nurses as you can use your experience to assist both your colleagues and the patients.’



‘The most rewarding aspect of this job is definitely seeing the difference you make as a TCO and the positive impact you have on the patient’s journey. I also love that I get to work with all members of the team.’

For Dorina, the most effective route to care is to ‘treat the patient as a family member’, whilst understanding that everyone is unique and each patient will need a slightly

different approach. As she says: ‘Being able to effectively listen to their concerns and being flexible to their needs is important.’

Whilst she believes that the role of a TCO is different in every practice, her own role at Happy Kids Dental entails a variety of responsibilities.

She explains: ‘I look after referral patients, orthodontic patients, general

anaesthesia patients and I assist all members of the team by liaising with different specialists for patients who require a multidisciplinary approach to make sure we provide the highest standards of patient care.'

The business may only be in its infancy, but is already a multi award-winner, and Dorina cites the team's attention to detail, the continuous specialist care and great teamwork as contributing to its successes. She says: 'We are all very passionate about what we do and we are all very proud of what we have achieved as a team.'

To succeed as a dental nurse, she believes being an organised team player with enthusiasm and work flexibility should dovetail with existing clinical skills but, most importantly, she says, 'you have to be a people person to be able to build a rapport with patients.'

Her teacher had a positive influence on her whilst qualifying as a dental nurse, and the people from the dental practices with whom she has worked during the last four years have helped her grow and develop.

Mentoring has therefore played a key role in her career development. She explains: 'It has been absolutely essential. For a short while, I was lucky to have a lovely teacher, Deepa, while I was studying dental. The dentists I have worked with throughout the years have always shared their knowledge with me and encouraged me to follow my dreams. My teacher, Edita, who mentored me through the care coordinator course, has been absolutely amazing – she too has been supportive and flexible to suit my needs. She is an inspiration.'

Dorina believes good communication is essential for great team



working – 'I truly believe that this role can only achieve its maximum potential with good communication. The role of the treatment coordinator includes all members of the team so the success of a treatment coordinator also depends on the

environment in which you work.'

Her final key essentials, however, are far more tangible – 'I cannot see myself working without my "to do" lists, Excel spreadsheets, email tasks and, definitely, my trustworthy notebook.'

The good, the bad – and the necessary

The **best reward** for me is seeing the difference in the patient's journey. We treat many anxious patients and it is great to see how they feel more comfortable in our practice with every visit. We create a close relationship with them and their parents.

The **most common challenge** that we deal with is the perception about dentistry. Prevention is very important, so part of my role is to make sure parents and children are aware of the key oral health messages. We aim to make a dental visit a pleasant experience and, to that end, try to involve children in their care.

Know your strengths. Most importantly, you need to believe in yourself. You must be willing to go the extra mile. Try to learn as much as possible about the different treatments available at your current practice. It can take a little while to get there but it is so rewarding! Since this is a relatively new role in the industry, I have found that there is little guidance for a TCO, so you have to be patient. I think the role as a dental nurse is changing for the better and it will have a more rounded, clearer career path in the near future. I have not been qualified for a very long time as a dental nurse. However, I can see how things have changed. The role is requiring now to be much more involved in patient care and there are more career progression possibilities.

Happy Kids Dental – getting out and about



Helene Schirmer is one of the practice's dual qualified dental hygienists and therapists and regularly takes the key oral health messages out on the road to local schools and nurseries with other team members in the form of 'entertaining and fun free workshops'.

Here, she explains why this approach can make a difference.

You have created 'entertaining and fun free workshops for local schools, promoting the benefits of healthy habits for children'. How have these been received? What age range are you hoping to reach?

It takes an innovative practice to discover that some of its best dentistry is delivered outside the four walls of its surgeries. Our sessions tend to focus on nursery and primary school-age children, as it's important to start good habits early.

Developing a good oral hygiene routine and diet, with regular trips to the dentist starting at an early age, is really important in maintaining good oral health and preventing problems. It is a concern that tooth decay remains the number one reason why children (aged 5-9) are admitted to

hospital. We firmly believe that education is key to preventing problems, which is why we visit local schools and promote the benefits of healthy habits for children, tailoring our sessions to what best suits the age group and school.

For younger nursery age children, we have two clinicians visit and do a fun workshop where we learn through play, with fancy dress, a puppet and stories. Pupils dress up as the dental team and teeth, learning about visiting the dentist and dispelling the notion that visiting the dentist is anything to be afraid of. The pupils also learn about how to brush correctly and also about healthy foods and drinks, as well as the importance of these healthy habits.

For older primary school children we have our show, with a clinician and two actors playing the Tooth Wizard and Plaque Man. The show is also a journey talking about healthy habits, such as effective plaque control, a healthy balanced diet and visiting the dentist regularly. The Tooth Wizard is very much the children's hero by the end of the show – but our villain, Plaque Man, is always a favourite with the children! We also do workshops for year 6 children that focuses on a more in-depth look at correct brushing technique and the impact of poor oral health habits.

The sessions are always incredibly well received by the pupils and teachers, and we've also heard some great reviews from parents who have subsequently brought their children to the practice.

We had a mum bring in her child recently and he had previously been terrified about visiting the dentist, but he begged her to visit our practice after attending one of our workshops – and he was so incredibly happy with his dental experience with us.

You regularly visit nurseries in and around your practices. How key are these workshops when encouraging better oral health care, better eating and a regular visit to see you?

We feel our oral health promotion visits are key in encouraging better oral health care, healthier eating habits and raising awareness of the importance of regular dental visits. Recent NHS statistics show that more than 40% of children in England did not see a dentist last year, and recent Public Health England guidance said that although oral health is improving in England almost a quarter (24.7%) of five year olds have tooth decay, so one in four children will have tooth

decay when they start school. Each child with tooth decay will have on average three to four teeth affected.

Do you offer leaflets and access to downloads for patients about tooth-brushing activity or offering dietary advice?

We want our website to be a great hub of information. We are currently having our leaflets redesigned as well, as a fairly new practice we are constantly tweaking the style and content of our patient information. Currently, we only supply tooth-brushing advice leaflets, brushing charts and dietary advice leaflets to schools and patients. It would be great to eventually make these more widely available via downloads, alongside some of the great blogs and videos about oral health that we have available on our website and in our social media activity.

You have an active social media presence (with fun facts, team photos and photos of healthy snacks) and receive lots of media coverage (YummyMummy magazine and The Metro to name but two). Is this the key to raising awareness among parents of good oral health habits, so their children enjoy lifelong dental health?

We feel having an active social media presence is a great way to engage and interact with parents and also our teenage patients, too. It's also a great way to make sure we're giving them the information they want. All teams should embark on long-term engagement about oral health with their patients rather than view it as a one-way bombardment of information. People are increasingly health aware and the way consumers are engaging with health services is changing. By opening up a conversation, we can improve our service design, quality and come up with innovative ideas.

It's also a great way for us to share our brand ethos and show people that we are a holistic, compassionate and comprehensive team, building positive patient relationships, making prevention fun and easy while being



able to help with the transition to treatment. We hope to become our patients' dental home, aiming for parents to consider dental visits an integral part of their children's healthy lifestyle.

How important is word of mouth by parents when it comes to talking about your unique approach?

Word of mouth is incredibly important to us as it is always linked to patient and parent satisfaction and flows directly out of their experience. We feel that Happy Kids Dental is so much more than just 'visiting the dentist'. It is truly something that needs to be experienced to understand our unique approach and atmosphere. Having parents and patients share their positive experiences and demonstrate their trust in us is the best way to show other parents that our team and Happy Kids Dental is the perfect practice for their children, too.

How does dental fear contribute to poor oral health in your experience?

In our experience, dental fear can become a barrier to visiting the dentist and can contribute to poor oral health, whether by not accessing care early enough to prevent bigger problems, or not accessing support and advice on maintaining good oral health through brushing and a healthy diet.

Barriers may have been created for a variety of reasons. It might be that a parent, having had a negative experience, is finding it difficult to come into a dental practice or the child itself has had a negative experience – both scenarios can be difficult to overcome and we need to rebuild their trust.

Many of the team here at Happy Kids Dental are parents, too, so we understand how to help parents if they or their child has dental anxiety and aim to get them on board with visiting the dentist and maintaining a healthy happy smile. From our practice atmosphere to our team ethos and cutting-edge equipment, we've worked hard to make visiting us easy and fun – and to put dental fear firmly where it belongs: in the past.

What resources do you highlight to parents?

We believe in a solid scientific evidence based approach and are advocates of Dental Check by One and Change4Life (especially the food scanner). We also routinely use the Oral B Test drive system and Oral B apps. We often get asked to try out new gadgets and resources, which are tested by our team. We are selective with what we do recommend.

We are also often asked by parents for our opinion on popular gadgets and oral health gimmicks and are always open to discussing their evidence base and whether they are actually beneficial.