

Brace yourself: a career in dentistry

Dr Andrew Logeswaran, Dental Surgeon, Essex

Good afternoon to you all and thank you to, Chris for inviting me to speak to you today. It's a great pleasure being back at the University of Leicester, I graduated here in 2007. Some of you might remember me from somewhere else; I was actually in the prospectus a few years ago for the wrong degree, I did Medical Biochemistry here, not Medical Physiology.

I work as a dentist now, in Colchester, Essex. I work four days a week treating a mixture of NHS and private patients. I'm a general practitioner which means I treat the whole lot, fillings, extractions, and so on. I work with a great team; it's a large practice so we've got quite a big team. It's great fun being at work, we bounce ideas off of each other and it's a fantastic place to be.

My route into dentistry was quite convoluted. When I was in your position, roughly ten years ago, I literally had no idea what I wanted to do with my career. My focus was on medicine at that time. When I was at school I applied to Medicine at Leicester. Unfortunately I missed my grades and so I did Medical Biochemistry instead.

During my BSc, I applied for Medicine again, at Leicester again. This time I got rejected, so I did an MSc in the Department of Chemistry. Now I had an MSc I thought I'd reapply to Medicine and probably get in. I applied to Leicester again, but got rejected for a second time, so I was a bit disheartened.

I took time out from University. I worked in the NHS for about 18 months in management roles and it was here that I looked at different areas of health care. Able to see it from that perspective I realised that medicine was definitely *not* for me, so I was actually happy that I got rejected twice; it wasn't the right path for me. I looked at other healthcare professions and realised dentistry looked like a good career path for me. I did work experience and then did the four year course at the University of Central Lancashire. I qualified from there in 2014.

What I'm trying to say to you guys is that I took quite a long path to get to where I am now. I had a few setbacks along the way, so don't be disheartened if you get setbacks in your pathway, as long as you get there in the end with whatever you want to do.

So why do I do dentistry? My patients are always ask me "Why do you like looking at people's mouths all day long?" For me dentistry is about changing lives. For example, I treated a guy during my final year at University. He had hardly any teeth in his mouth; he couldn't eat, he couldn't speak properly. Giving someone back their self-confidence is something that you can do in dentistry. That motivates me; my passion for dentistry comes from these sorts of reasons.

What do we do all day long as a dentist? People think it's all about drilling and filling and you're working at your chair all day long, but in dentistry you are actually using a range of skills. As a dentist you are trained to pick up early signs of mouth cancers, getting people the appropriate referrals. These sorts of diseases can progress really quickly and affect the quality of life of a patient. If you can pick these things up early as a dentist, then you are doing a great thing for the patients.

We do a lot of education with patients; talking to them about how to reduce their levels of sugar intake and making them aware of the damage it does to the mouth, for their teeth and their general health as well. Again, smoking cessation advice and making patients aware how smoking can cause cancer, just trying to reduce that risk as well. We talk about brushing and how to maintain good oral hygiene, all of which is quite rewarding.

As a general practitioner, I would generally see about thirty patients in a day, doing a whole range of treatments for them. On any given day I probably see two or three patients who are in severe pain. If you've ever have had tooth pain before, you'll know that it can be really bad; it can give you sleepless nights. So treating patients like this and getting them out of pain using the skills you have within fifteen minutes or so, that's a really good thing to do. It's satisfying for yourself, and they really respect the work that you do.

As a dentist, you can do things like cosmetic orthodontics, moving teeth for functional reasons and aesthetic reasons. You can do additional qualifications if you're interested in this kind of work. People don't generally realise that dentists can also do things like Botox and Fillers. With the appropriate qualifications after dental school we can start doing this for patients. a colleague of mine called Dr Ash Parmar carries out quite complex mouth makeover work. So, again, if that's the sort of thing that interests you as a dentist you can do extra courses and get up to date with the relevant skills.

What will you gain from being at Dental School? The main thing is you are going to get to see and treat patients across a wide age range. You'll develop the people skills to work with them on a daily basis. You've done team working during your BSc, now you're going to work with different teams and gain appreciation of the dental team at Uni and how this relates to life as a dentist post-qualification. In a dental practice a dentist is seen as a leader. You develop those leadership skills in a clinical environment whilst at Dental school.

Hand skills are a big part of being a dentist. Don't worry if you don't feel you've got those skills now, you pick these up at University and it's nice to see the transformation from when you start to when you finish at Dental school. Mine were not good at all when I first started, but I improved as I went along.

Where can you apply for Dental School? There are fifteen Dental Schools in the UK for a five year course. There's quite a wide geographic variation in places you can go to. You need a 2:1 in your degree at the moment to apply to these courses. There are four dental schools that do the four year course: Central Lancashire – where I studied, King's College London, Liverpool and Aberdeen. Again, you need a 2:1 in your degree to be eligible to apply.

People usually think Dental school is just about studying teeth for four or five years, but its not. You learn about the whole body system and how it all interacts, because the patients come into your surgery and they have all sorts of issues and you need to know how they interact with the oral cavity and the medicines you administer how they affect their illness as well. Don't worry, you won't just be learning about teeth at university, you will be learning about the other body systems too.

You are going to be exposed to new styles of learning, so something we did at University was called PBL, Problem based learning. It's where you are given a scenario as a group and you'll all go away and research different parts of a topic and then present back to each other and learn from each other, so it's something different. I think at Leicester you were mostly spoon fed at lectures, but this is more of a teamwork environment that you learn in. Again, something different is you work on your communication skills by working with actors who take on the role of patients, so before you start clinically, you work with actors to see how good your communication skills are. These are usually filmed, so you can watch it back and see how you can improve your communication skills both verbally and non-verbally as well.

This is where we improve our hand skills at University, so in the first year usually, you use something called a phantom head which has plastic teeth in, so you drill and fill this away and the best thing about this is if you make a mistake you take the teeth out put another one back in and start again, so it is a safe environment, nothing can go wrong really and you are assessed by tutors.

As I said, you start in the first year with plastic teeth and then when you are confident you can move on to the real patients and real teeth and this where the fun kicks in Dental School in the clinical years. We had a lot of fun in Dental School. You're in great teams. You make friends for life, both professionally and personally. It's a lot of hard work, but there is also fun, we had a lot of fun at Dental School, so don't think it's going to be all hard work and no play.

I will talk to you now about funding a dental degree because it changes depending on whether you are doing a four year course or the five year course. On the four year course, in the first year the first third of the £9000 you've got to self-fund yourself and the remainder is what the tuition fee loan will cover, so you pay that back once you're earning over I think, £21,000 a year. Years 2, 3 and 4 for the four year course, the NHS pays the first third of the tuition fees. That's a bursary, so you do not pay that back and then the following two thirds of that tuition fee loan covers again, so you've got to pay that back once you've graduated.

That's quite different from the five year course. For the five year course, you have to pay the first £9000 for the first four years all yourself, so it's quite a big difference there for the five year course. Then the fifth year, the NHS kicks in and they pay the first third and then the tuition fee loan covers the final two thirds, so that's quite a big difference and it might make you change what type of course you apply to in that sense.

What do dentists do after they qualify? Is it just being a dentist in a practice or are there other career pathways out there as well. The main one, which I am on now is General Practitioner. You finish dental school and you do something called vocational training, which is a one year spent in a general practice where you have a trainer who assesses you and brings you up to speed with the NHS policies and you will get a fixed salary for that year. I think it is probably going to go up for next year if you do apply for it. You can become an Associate Dental Practicer, which is where you can treat patients on the NHS, privately or a mixture. You are self-employed for that year. If you want to go buy a practice, you can do and then be a Principal Dentist and the owner. Another route people can take, which is not really taken, is to be a private dentist straight from Dental

School, but it's hard to get a job, you have no experience and it's not really the route people take. You limit yourself to just private patients only, you can't treat patients on the NHS by doing this, so no one really does this route, but it is out there if you want to go down that route.

Another quite rewarding part of dentistry is something called the salaried dentist, so if you don't want to be in general practice having the pressures of being self-employed, you can do something called a salaried dentist and people like this treat patients in prison, treat patients in the army, so you can travel around the world with this. Another really rewarding part of it is treating special needs patients, so patients that can't get access to dentistry normally for whatever reasons such as, disabilities or severe anxiety, you can treat those patients, so it's quite rewarding as a Dentist.

You might have heard of something called Specialist in Dentistry, such as an Orthodontist. They take a different pathway, so they do a second year on foundation training within a hospital where you can do it after you have been an associate. You do further training, so an MSc for about three or four years and then you do a training pathway for two or three years afterwards and then you become a specialist in that area, so you limit your practice just to that area in dentistry if you enjoy that area. The name people usually recognise and relate to is an Orthodontist. There are others out there such as root canal treatment specialist and gum specialist as well.

If you like the complexity of surgery and medicine, you would go back to medical school and do a four or five year medical degree, go through the foundation years as a doctor would and do something called a Maxillofacial Training pathway, which is about five or six years after that, so it's quite a long pathway if you think about it because of the number of years, but you're doing very complex treatments, such as trauma cases or treating cancer patients in hospital and you will be exposed to this at Dental School during your placements as well.

To finish off, some tips for applying to Dental School if you're interested.

Read about the dental news. There is a site called dentistry.co.uk, it's what I used when I applied just to read up on how the NHS works and what's going on in the dental environment at the moment. This can be very good for you guys if you are looking at interviews and they ask you questions on dental news during interviews. Another one (thedentalstudent.co.uk) is made by a dental student at Kings. Again, great resource, loads of information here if you're looking to find a Dental School and for interview techniques as well. This (teethgeek.com) is made by a friend of mine from Sheffield. It's a bit out of date, but there is still good information there for finding a Dental School if you are interested.

The next thing I will say to you as before, prepare, prepare, prepare. You are going to have interviews to prepare for. Some Universities run pre-admissions test such as the UKCAT, so prepare for that and also for your personal statement as well, make sure that you prepare for that and get it checked by people in your family and friends, because the deadline is October 15th, the same as medicine.

The number one thing you can do if you are really interested in dentistry is shadow a dentist. You will know from here whether dentistry is for you or not by doing this, so speak to your own family dentist, see if you can shadow them. If not, apply to nearby practices. One thing you can do is

shadow a dentist in the community as well, so you get an idea of salaried services and maybe even shadow a dental technician, you will get an appreciation for the wider dentistry scene, which is what I did for my shadowing as well. If you're lucky try to speak to a Maxillofacial Surgeon and watch them in hospital as well. It will also be good for your personal statement.

The best part of dentistry for me is, I see a patient, I see a child, I'll see the mother, I'll see the grandparents, they watch you over your career, you watch them grow up as well, which is really good and that's what I enjoy about general practice, being able to treat the whole family and get referrals from patients and their friends as well for the good work that you do. This was a patient I treated one day and he took to social media to describe the service he got at the dental practice, so it's quite nice to see that the things you do in dentistry, people do appreciate it and they write about it on social media, which is quite a nice thing to see as a professional.

I said to you guys before, there are so many avenues for you to go down. Don't just choose something because the moneys good, just make sure you do the appropriate research, make a well informed choice about what you want to do. I'm sure you will go down the right path if you do that.

Thank you again for the invite, Chris and good luck to you all. If anyone wants any information, please contact me.

Questions

Q: Did you go down the private or NHS route?

A: I went the NHS route. I did the vocational training in 2014-15 and I'm now in a mixed practice, so I treat NHS and private patients.

Q: You said what the best thing about the job was, what's the worst thing about the job?

A: It can be stressful. That's why I work four days a week, you need that day in between the week to rest and get your mental abilities back together. We are in a litigious society, people do sue a lot. I haven't been sued yet, but I'm sure it will come in the future at some point. Every dentist is going to have that in the future. Stress levels are probably one of the worst parts of dentistry.

Q: You drew people's attention to the fact that funding is different for the four and the five year course. Clearly that is a big factor. In terms of the content, four years is doable, it doesn't have a reputation of being harder or too impossibly packed in content?

A: No. You have shorter holidays as a four year course, because the terms are a bit longer, but in terms of context it's manageable for you guys doing a BSc.

Q: Is it possible to get into Dentistry school without doing a Masters?

A: Yes you can do. Most of my batch were from doing a BSc straight into Dental School.

Q: What is the difference between the four and the five years? Why is it so different in terms of funding?

A: I think because the five year course is made just for people straight from school and that's the reason why you're seen as doing another degree, you've already done a degree before and that's why you can't get funding, which is a bit of a shame for people doing a five year course.

The figures shown for funding were based on Graduates. If you were starting from scratch you would get the student tuition fee for the full five years.

Q: Do you have to do two foundation years to be an associate dentist, or can you just do one?

A: Just one. You do two if you want to, to get experience in hospital, but I just did one.