

The dental nurse's role in orthodontics

Raj Jabbal gives an insight into the importance of orthodontic nurses in practice



Orthodontics was my savior; I was close to leaving the field of dentistry until I realised its energy and felt inspired by its creativity. I have worked in 25 facilities/clinics/hospitals to date, with over 200 different orthodontic nurses, all with varying skills and expertise.



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Orthodontics can be an equally rewarding experience for dental nurses. The field is exciting, fluid and constantly moving between aesthetics and function. Patients generally enter the clinic happy to learn more about the functioning of their teeth and excited to embark on their treatment journey. In many cases this means we will be seeing patients for a long time. As treatment progresses, we become a part of their lives for months – sometimes even years! Perhaps the most amazing aspect of being an orthodontic dental nurse is that you can actually connect with the patients due to the length of time you see them for. This is in comparison to other fields in dentistry which deal primarily with the disease and pain from caries, abscesses and the like.

Different dynamics

Without an orthodontic nurse I am lost. It is impossible for an orthodontist to work alone effectively. Whilst there is the obvious need to assist the clinician, prepare and sterilise the surgery between patients, the important point to remember is that in orthodontics we can sometimes see a large number of patients. In some clinics this number can be up to 40-50 patients per day. The fast-paced nature of clinical activity makes it an exciting, energetic and varied environment, which is why it is never tiresome. The day is always busy and eventful, so it passes very quickly! A good orthodontic dental nurse will be able to take all of this in their stride. The level of organisation required under such dynamic circumstances is significantly greater.

Tech savvy

From fitting braces on teeth to removing them, each and every appointment during a “tightening” is more of a Sudoku puzzle. New technology comes thick and fast in the field of orthodontics, and this is an arena where you learn how to use the latest equipment including scanners, 3D printers and varying systems. There are also the important aspects of understanding metals, auxiliaries, brackets and elastics, implants and other innovations. Being adaptable enough to embrace new technologies and having a constant desire to learn is key. The fascinating world of orthodontics is that nothing is ever the same, there is wonderfully constant change and dynamism.

Procedures as an orthodontic dental nurse

Orthodontic dental nurses perform a multitude of tasks including preparing and sterilising the clinic for surgery, assisting the orthodontist in correcting the patient’s malocclusion of the teeth and all aspects of patient care. It is the dental nurse’s job to ensure that all materials and instruments necessary for the treatment are set up correctly as well as cleaning down post-procedure. The dental nurse also assists in supporting the clinician with the system the patient has, whether it be an aligner or a fixed appliance. If the dental nurse has auxiliary skills such as photography, impression taking or giving oral hygiene instructions this is an added advantage!

Communication is key

Given the busy nature of an orthodontic practice there needs to be a certain level of communication and understanding between myself and the dental nurse. The better the communication skills the smoother the treatment procedure and the happier the patient! Trust is also essential; in the dental profession we all look for trust. We expect that our orthodontic therapists actually do the best for their patients and that every appointment they perform is undertaken to the best of their abilities. Precision, action and patient care are important areas of focus in orthodontic dental nursing.

Quick learner

A successful orthodontic nurse needs to be able to learn on the go and to adapt to the

circumstances depending on the clinical condition at hand. Treatments are usually fast-paced and dynamic. One needs to be alert, adaptable, resourceful and able to handle the intense bursts of energy. Of course, other aspects include being friendly and chatty! A good orthodontic nurse should be able to interpret situations and respond accordingly whether interacting with the clinician or the patient.

Routes of training

Most orthodontic nurses are trained in clinic under supervision without a specific degree/diploma/certificate. This has both its advantages and disadvantages. A more structured approach would be to adopt a new qualification from a university or training provider which may assist the dental nurse in further career progression. In most cases this is seen as an advantage in NHS practices. In private care, clinicians would prefer the dental nurse to be trained in other skills such as impression taking, photography or oral hygiene education. I’m part of the clinical advisory team at SmileWisdom, a training provider which offers a range of CPD courses of this nature that may facilitate a move into orthodontic dental nursing and allow for an expansion of duties.

Career development

An orthodontic dental nurse with some experience (six months plus) would be able to consider applying to become an orthodontic therapist. This is a position which needs more precision, discipline and thoughtfulness; it may well not be for every dental nurse. Orthodontic therapists need to be careful when working with patients, they need to be much more exact and aware of small deviations from the norm, considering aspects of physiology, psychology, anatomy and material science. This could be considered as the pinnacle of orthodontic assistance. In addition, development of orthodontic dental nurses’ ability to handle clinical situations may well be the next step. As the specialties are diffusing amongst dentists, and now to the therapists, there is a very big chance that the nurse themselves will start to treat, albeit under instruction.

The future of orthodontics

Newer technologies keep entering the orthodontic market and these are for the



most part easy to adapt to. However, the future in orthodontics is very interesting, from understanding how we diagnose to how we treat. Some amazing innovations in technology are coming to the fore whereby computer vision will ally with the clinician to assist in radiograph diagnosis and treatment from afar via teledentistry. Novel treatment planning will be in the form of neural networks with deep learning and with artificial intelligence on the horizon the opportunities are endless. The role of the orthodontic nurse will need to change as well with more and more options becoming available in their further training. They may need courses in scanning, aligner delivery and mechanics, splint delivery as well as remote communication with orthodontists. An understanding of telemonitoring will be needed along with how to interface with patients, from the remotest parts of the world, who never thought it possible to receive orthodontics. The orthodontic nurse will need to be confident in moving forward digitally and adept at controlling and utilising these novel systems and software.

For more information on SmileWisdom’s NEBDN Oral Health Education post-registration course, CPD, clinical photography and extended duties courses for dental nurses, including impression taking, contact training@smilewisdom.co.uk