

Connie Hardwick, Academic Clinical Fellow at the University of Bristol

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"It's nice to do the zigzag: a pathway into dental specialty training"

Going into dental specialty training can seem overwhelming; hence I met up with Miss Connie Hardwick (BDS), who shared her route with me. The aim of sharing Connie's journey is to reassure those of you considering specialty training, that there is not just one pathway into your chosen dental specialty, you do not have to decide what you want to do with your career straight after Dental Foundation Training (DFT); it is a journey to be enjoyed.

As a DFT, you've had such little experience in the world of dentistry. Do we need to be making big decisions of specialty training and applying to DCT so early on or, could that place be reserved for somebody that has maybe been a General Dental Practitioner (GDP) for x number of years and understanding what we love? Therefore, what was your inspiration for applying for Dental Core Training (DCT)?

"We worked in a hospital when we were students, and I really enjoyed that team element, but I also really enjoyed working in practise. So, I thought I'm going to apply for DCT and see what happens. I enjoyed paediatric dentistry; Bristol had a position, and I thought if I get this role, I will go for it. Even if I want to go back to practise, I'm not going to lose the skills but develop new ones. I'm still doing dentistry and I'm in a place I really enjoy."

As a fifth-year dental student, I have often heard: "If you are thinking of specialising, make sure you get involved with

extracurricular at university, do your MFDS (Member of the Faculty of Dental Surgery) as soon as possible, apply for DCT straight after DFT etc." However, DCT is intense, it is competitive, you might not have figured out what you truly enjoy at this stage and who knows what all this stuff really means so early in your dentistry career?

"Starting the Bristol DCT job was a massive eye opener because I was with people who knew what they wanted to do. I didn't yet know. I just thought I'll explore options, and it was a bit of an eye opener because some people had completed exams, started writing publications, completed audits and presentations. This was a real opportunity for me to develop my CV and how can I improve if I decide the hospital pathway or the practice route."

How did you decide to go onto DCT2?

"My biggest tip is, don't ever say no to an opportunity, always explore every avenue. I'm one of those people that would rather apply for something and not get it, than close the door on an opportunity."

"I really enjoyed DCT1, more than I anticipated so the natural step was applying for DCT2, I also knew how the process worked and was in the hospital mindset. I still hadn't closed off the idea of going into practise again. DCT 2 in oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMFS) was really enjoyable, but it was hard in a different sense. You are working in a medical world as a dentist. Working in Accident and Emergency (A&E), working long night shifts, working 36 plus hours on a weekend with potentially no stops, and working in A&E where patients come in with the police or have been in nasty road traffic incidents. This role created a huge development in me personally. It sounds very cliched if I had not done my OMFS year, I would not be the person I am now. I think it gives you such good training and good grounding."

"If you had asked me as I started my DFT, there's absolutely no way I would have thought I would have been embarking on that route."

A concern from myself and other students is how do I stand out on my CV? How do I get into research?

"I was never particularly academic at university, I worked really hard to pass my exams, but I was never top of the year. I didn't get involved with research outside of the timetable. [During DCT1] I had some interesting cases and I was able to do a poster presentation at an international conference; it was at this point I realised there are different elements to dentistry: you can travel and meet other clinicians and learn from international colleagues. I later joined the paediatric specialty trainee research group called CONNECT after attending a talk at the national paediatric conference. Opportunities came out of it, I became involved in doing a national research project and completed qualitative interviews. The group has members interested in research, some completing PhDs, others doing MSc and other members involved in teaching. Everyone learns from each other and attends courses. It is a fantastic opportunity. Now I am combining my clinical career in paediatric dentistry and an academic

career, and I couldn't be happier. This however would not have been possible without support and guidance from my academic and educational supervisors".

This summary of Connie's dental career to date wasn't as smooth as it sounds, sometimes you have knockbacks. "It is demoralising when you think you're working really hard and you're ticking all the boxes but maybe not progressing as fast as you would like. However, keep going, keep taking opportunities that interest you and your career will develop."

From Connie's perspective, here are the advantages and disadvantages to taking the longer/specialty route:

Advantages

- You are pushed out of your comfort zone
- Endless learning
- Meet lots of different people
- Acquire new skills
- Research projects
- Become a well-rounded clinician
- Opportunities

Disadvantages

- It takes time
- Have to re-apply for DCT every year and then for specialty roles and academic roles
- May have to relocate
- Hospital jobs take longer to 'lay down roots'

Conclusion

I would like to reiterate that these events have taken place over a course of seven years. Connie is now one year into specialty training as an Academic Clinical Fellow in Paediatric Dentistry which will be three to five years of clinical training, plus time completing her academic pursuits. Within this, she plans to pursue an NIHR doctoral research fellowship. Many of us dentists are perfectionists, we like to plan, however, Connie is a great example to emphasise that your career is not a linear path. She did not plan any of this and by taking opportunities, it happened organically. Unfortunately, the fear of failure can prevent us from taking these leaps of faith. Hence, a key piece of advice from Connie is to "never turn down an opportunity".

"If you imagine the London Underground map, it's all massively interlinked and you can take a little diversion" but "the most important thing is enjoying the journey, It's nice to do the zigzag."

Hence the theme of this article: it's NOT a straightforward path, it's a "zig zag", do whatever best suits you, take opportunities and see where the journey takes you.

Photo kindly provided by Connie Hardwick