On-the-job training

When it comes to vocational placements, don’t be daunted. Each situation is a learning opportunity and ultimately, you are only going to get out what you put in, says Sarah Armstrong

The stress of finals behind you, vocational training (VT) launches new dental graduates across the country into general dental practice. Although it’s a daunting time, it’s also one of great opportunity, gaining clinical freedom, financial independence and moving away from the never-ending stream of assessments that go hand-in-hand with dental school. That said, you’re not going to be abandoned now that you’ve qualified and VT provides a fantastic support network to aid in making the transition from student to professional.

In your first month, you really need to be thinking about what you want to gain from the training year, and for this it’s useful to start thinking about what your strengths and weaknesses are and where you see your career progressing. Are there certain aspects of dentistry that you’d like to gain more experience in? Are there certain procedures that you don’t feel confident carrying out?

Keep an open mind

If your dentures are awful, don’t just try and avoid providing the treatments you find challenging, discuss things with your trainer, other associates or vocational dental trainees (VDPs), highlight several challenging cases and book some protected time to undertake these getting assistance where necessary, struggling on regardless won’t help anyone. Don’t think purely clinical either, working in practice requires diverse knowledge rarely discussed within dental school – employment contracts, UDA targets, staff management, legislation and even maintaining equipment all form a key role in practice life.

Although you will have more freedom, there are assessments conducted throughout the year, the nature of which depends on your Deanery. Usually these include several observed clinical situations, an audit, a case presentation, patient satisfaction questionnaires, and a key skills portfolio. You will also be required to complete a portfolio of professional development. Again, these vary between Deaneries, although usually tend to require reflection on clinical activities and study days that you’ve undertaken on a weekly/monthly basis and include appraisals regarding your general progression which allow comments to be added by your vocational trainer and advisor.

Although often viewed as tedious and time consuming, the portfolio is a useful tool to accumulate a record of your experience, can highlight useful information about your progression and can be useful as evidence as you progress through your dental career.

Hitting the books

Study days form a fundamental part of the VT year. For a start, it’s nice to have a break from practice once a week, as diving into five days of full-time dentistry from the relatively slow-paced world of dental school can be a shock to the system! They are a great opportunity and enable your confidence to grow.

Often VT schemes are formed from VDPs who graduated from a range of dental schools, which brings a great mix to the group and really highlights the huge variations in ideas/techniques taught. The program of study days varies though tend to include updates on clinical subjects, financial independence and practice management, and often a few away days – usually to the young dentist careers conference and to the BDA conference. By the end of the year you’ll have CPD hours spilling out of your ears!

Testing times

Exams may be the last thing on your mind following your slog through finals, but now really is the best time to take MFDS/MJDF examinations while all the information is fresh in your head and your finals revision notes aren’t yet stowed in the loft. Although challenging, the depth of information required is not dissimilar to finals and you’ll find it much easier to get your head down and revise now than a few years down the line when you are out of the habit!

That said, it’s important to remember that there’s more to life than dentistry. Dentistry has an unnerving ability to take over your life, and it’s really not helpful to stew for days over that 3:15pm patient with the scleroderma bicuspid canals you’ve been trying to RCT or the distal margins of the crown prep you cut on the patient with the gag reflex!

Expect to be tired. Dental school may have felt like hard work at the time, but you will now be seeing many more patients per day and taking responsibility for all your decisions made during VT so it’s important to eat well and get enough sleep!

Different experiences

Everyone’s VT experience is different depending on your location, practice size and type, and the attitudes/support of your trainer. Some VDPs will have the newest, flashiest equipment at their disposal, where as others may have to learn how to perfect their techniques with a more limited armamentarium. Some VDPs may have proactive motivated trainers whereas others will be more laid back who promote your clinical independence and enable your confidence to grow. Each have their pros and cons so try and take every situation as a learning opportunity and ultimately, you are only going to get out of VT year what you put in.

About the author

Sarah Armstrong qualified from Newcastle University in 2008 and is currently working as a maxillofacial surgery senior house officer at Newcastle General Hospital.