Don’t ask how I am... 
Elaine Halley admits she’s an MSc bore

I am officially becoming an MSc bore. I consistently find myself telling anyone who makes the mistake of asking me the all searching question of ‘how are you?’ all about the quandary of deciding upon my research question for the dissertation. I have practically given lectures on the subject – in the most inappropriate places such as my nephew’s two year old birthday party or a dinner party with non-dental friends – the checkout assistant in Tesco’s got away lightly.

I liken it to when I was training for the marathon and other runners I knew have felt the same. Because you are completely immersed in it and there is an adrenaline rush caused by the stress and Paul Brocklehurst’s infamous words ‘your degree is at risk’ ringing in our ears, at any given opportunity the ability to let off steam and include others in your world is tantalising. The only problem is that nobody else really cares – their eyes glaze over and you can see them plotting their escape! I was a running bore, now I am an MSc bore. Of course, I do recognise that I am the common denominator in both these scenarios. Hmmm.

And so – the month of September, as I have alluded to, sees the start of our dissertation and the introduction of our full-time research tutor, Jane. A few of my colleagues have done the sensible thing and written up their four posterior cases which are due early October. Most of us have not and so turning on the added pressure of our four case reports, plus the complex case which are due over and above the dissertation.

The dissertation material is taught/followed using Manchester University’s all new platform Blackboard 9 – which most of us couldn’t access in time to start the learning process, and then there have been a few glitches such as an uneditable pdf for a Master Pro-forma which we were supposed to edit and hand-in to a deadline. This has caused a massive increase in stress due to time wasted trying to figure out ‘is it just me’ in the technical department. There are discussion threads for peer-to-peer support but these are so complicated to follow (again, may just be me) that I have resorted to old-fashioned email. There are frequent deadlines designed to keep us working to a sensible time-scale as this project is too big to manage all at the last minute. In theory, with the constant feedback, we are guided through the structure and thought process so that we can’t go off on a tangent and ‘put our degree at risk’. Ok – we get it – this dissertation is the make or break of the whole course.

We have had the speediest feedback ever on our Aims and Objectives which is a welcome change, so it does feel like Manchester University and our tutor Jane are ready to help us with this phase. Our dissertation is to design a research project around a clinical question. So far we have had to develop our question and define our aims and objectives. Next is a literature search which we have to write up in 2,500 words to hand-in in a few weeks. This will involve revising all the technical terms such as Boolean operators and MESH terms. I am still battling with the seemingly never ending confounders that come with my choice of question – a confounder being a variable which could be influencing the result but has nothing to do with the intervention of study and so lead to erroneous conclusions. I think, anyway – if you have a spare 20 minutes I could really begin to bore you on the subject...!