

BECOMING AN ORAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER - MEET THE APPRENTICE



Meet Vanessa Pirga, a Level 4 Oral Health Practitioner apprentice working at Bembridge Dental Practice on the Isle of Wight.

We spoke with Vanessa about her journey as an Oral Health Practitioner apprentice, keep reading to find out.

1**Where do you work?**

I work at Bembridge Dental Practice on the Isle of Wight. My main role in the practice is Practice Manager, but I also have a dental nursing qualification and undertake clinical duties. I am enrolled on the Oral Health Practitioner apprenticeship, due for completion in early 2022.

2**How did you get your apprenticeship?**

We received an e-flyer to the practice, we could see that it was a brand new course that provides additional skills for dental nurses. As I was looking to spend some more time undertaking clinical activities, we decided that I would put myself forward to undertake this new programme. Benefitting me professionally as well as improve the care we provide in the practice.

3**Who is your training provider and what is the study model like?**

The training provider is Health Education England, and the study model is predominantly face to face. We have had some remote learning due to COVID restrictions however when these were lifted we were all keen to learn in the classroom environment. There is an element of home working too, mainly reading about the subjects being taught, gaining competence with our practical skills and studying for exams.

4**What types of things have you been doing in your off-the-job learning?**

Outside of the taught sessions, we have been doing many things that I never thought I would do as part of being a dental nurse. I have researched health inequalities, gained an understanding of the needs of our local population, and undertaken additional duties in clinic such as audits.

5**What has been the hardest part?**

For me the hardest part has been the travel, coming from the island it is a bit of a trek and the weather hasn't helped with the travel arrangements. Where the course is brand new, it was hard to know what the course can lead to in the future in terms of career prospects in a high street dental practice.

6**What has been the best part?**

I have really enjoyed the work we have done with Karan, from the Royal Society of Public Health. It reinforced to me that the most important part of what we do is how we communicate with people so that we motivate them to improve their general health as well as their oral health.

7**What do you hope to do next?**

When I finish the course I would like to enrol other nurses from our practice onto the course so that we can develop a nurse led clinic dedicated to prevention, and also make use of our new found clinical skills to support the rest of the clinical team. This will to some degree be influenced by how NHS contracts change in the future, as practices need to be able to sustain these new clinics and be in a position where we are able to dedicate surgery time to prevention sessions rather than units of dental activity. I am hoping that I will be able to be involved in arranging external events on behalf of the practice, such as attending local shows to promote oral health.

8**What tips do you have for people who want to do the same apprenticeship as you?**

I think the main points are that you will need to be confident, reflective, and truly want to help your patient base to improve their oral health. You will need to be in a supportive environment where you will be given the opportunity to see patients yourself to complete your log books for clinical skills. Finally, you will need to be committed to learning new things and be able to dedicate the time to complete your coursework.