



MEET THE CHAIRS DENTAL TRAILBLAZER

We spoke with John Darby, HEE who is the chair of the Dental Apprenticeship Trailblazer Working Groups for Dental Nurse, Orthodontic Therapist, Clinical Dental Technician and Oral Health Practitioner. He is supported by co-chair Mike Wheeler, HEE. We asked John and Mike about the Trailblazer work and all the activity that has gone on over the past couple of years.

So, John and Mike, please tell us a bit about your day jobs?

John

I am Dean of Dental Postgraduate Education for HEE Thames Valley and Wessex. This is a part-time role which I took up soon after retiring from General Dental Practice. Most of my working life has been spent as a General Dental Practitioner Principal in Croydon, South London. During my practicing career I became more involved with dental foundation training as an Educational Supervisor, Training Programme Director and Associate Dean. My interest in, and support for Dental Care Professionals has grown throughout my career. I have been an examiner for, and chair of the National Examining Board for Dental Nurses and Course Director for the Faculty of General Dental Practice Diploma in Clinical Dental Technology.

Today I work with HEE Thames Valley and Wessex to deliver training programmes for the whole dental workforce, from foundation training, through core to specialty. We have a strong tradition in the deanery for supporting workforce development across the board and our enthusiasm for this strand of work has led us to pilot the new oral health practitioner apprenticeship.

Mike

I am Dental Workforce Advisor for HEE, this is a part time role, I am also a dental tutor for HEE South West with a focus at the moment on training health and social care staff in improving patient's oral health and I also work in general dental practice. As the title suggests I am involved with a wide range of dental workforce initiatives. Over the past few years most of my work has been around developing the whole suite of dental apprenticeships. This not only includes the clinical dental apprenticeships but also Dental Nurses, Dental Technicians, Dental Practice Managers and integrating the dental skills sets into the following apprenticeships; advanced clinical practitioner, enhanced clinical practitioner and laboratory technician.

Why did you step up to be chair of the Dental Trailblazer Working Groups?

John

When appointed as Postgraduate Dental Dean I volunteered to step in and continue the work of developing and refining dental workforce apprenticeships. This had not been a major focus for HEE dental careers, but it seemed important to me that it should become so. My background gave me the confidence and enthusiasm to take forward these important revisions to existing apprenticeships and to develop new ones. The opportunity to work with representatives of employer groups to help to design tailor-made educational programmes for important roles in the dental workplace. The model of learning "on the job" seemed such a sensible approach to these very practical roles. The excellent support that was available through Skills for Health and HEE gave me the confidence to undertake the role. The ongoing enthusiasm and reassuring support from HEE Dental Deans coupled with the major Advancing Dental Care workstream encouraged us to keep going through the complex and challenging processes.

Mike

When the new apprenticeship standards for dental nurse, dental practice manager and dental technician were developed, HEE were not involved. The trailblazer group did a great job in getting the main dental roles defined as apprenticeships and it was clear that apprenticeships could be used to develop the other members of the dental team. In turn creating greater routes of progression for dental nurses and dental technicians, and also enhancing their roles so greater numbers of people can access NHS dental care.

With the agreement of the main dental trailblazer group, HEE and the fantastic support of the Skills for Health Team a sub-group was formed to develop the existing clinical occupations of orthodontic therapist and clinical dental technicians into apprenticeships, but also introduce the concept of a formally qualified oral health educator which led to the development of the oral health practitioner role.

Several dental apprenticeship standards have now been approved for delivery and some have even undergone further revisions.

Looking back what were the challenges?

Both

The challenges were varied. The original dental nurse and dental technician apprenticeship standards were having some teething problems. However, encouraging the awarding bodies to join the trailblazer group changed the dynamics of how apprenticeships could and should be delivered. This was at the time the IFATE changed some of the parameters of the way in which apprenticeship standards needed to be defined, so we decided to redevelop them. Equally the EPA process was changing which resulted in the trailblazer group redefining both the standards and EPA's, the move to integrated apprenticeships was warmly welcomed by employers. So, the biggest challenge was keeping pace with the changes the IFATE were making! This was successful, last year there were over 5,000 individual learners undertaking the dental nurse apprenticeship.

The other difficulty worth mentioning was that dentistry, like all other occupations, has its own particular language, and at times it was a challenge to redefine the language the dental team uses every day in the workplace, to the everyday words that could be readily understood by the anyone reading the standard and EPA documents. That was certainly not without its demands, as was developing common terms for established methods of assessment, used in medical and dental training, such as an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), it was a real achievement to persuade the IFATE to accept this, but by calling it a "demonstration of practice", everyone was happy!

And what achievements are you most proud of?

Both

Defining, and seeing through to fruition all six dental apprenticeships, whilst also ensuring that members of the dental team may access other apprenticeships, such as the Advanced Clinical Practitioner and Enhanced Clinical Practitioner. ensures that members of the dental team can play an ever greater role in the provision of NHS oral health care. Apprenticeships will make a very significant contribution to the current HEE Advancing Dental Care Review, the aim of which is to "develop a dental education and training infrastructure that supplies a dental workforce with the skills to respond to the changing oral health needs of the patients and services".

Do you have any tips for other Trailblazer chairs?

Both

Be patient, it is challenging and at times frustrating. Giving everyone a voice is important, but the real skill is taking on board everyone's thoughts and opinions (and there are strong opinions that can be voiced!!), listening to everyone and drawing them together. It is very rewarding when it all comes together, as it usually does in the end, in our experience.

As organisations implement the standards, what challenges have they encountered?

Both

The dental nurse apprenticeship is very popular. Dental Nurses are the largest GDC registrant group in our workforce, 47,000 in England but encouraging employers to release their team members for “off the job” training can be a challenge! Moving the smaller occupations of Orthodontic Therapists and Clinical Dental Technicians to apprenticeships is to be very warmly welcomed by employers, however, as most current providers use the Royal College of Surgeons of England and Edinburgh as their awarding bodies, the transition needs to be carefully and sensitively negotiated. The need for these awarding bodies to achieve OFQUAL or QAA approval is slowing the progress for their uptake, although developments are in train for an orthodontic therapist provider.

Do you have any top tips for employers considering implementing these apprenticeships?

Both

- Engage fully with the process
- Enable your employees to access the 20% off the job training
- Use apprenticeships for career progression such as into Oral Health Practitioner or Clinical Dental Technician roles

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