"Watching trainees develop and gain surgical skills is another rewarding aspect of the job."

Miss Kathleen Fan is consultant in oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMFS) at King's College Hospital and is also an honorary senior lecturer at King's College London.

Miss Kathleen Fan

Consultant in oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMFS)

Employer or university
King's College Hospital
Portrait of Miss Kathleen Fan

How I got into the role

Expand / collapse

I couldn't decide whether to study dentistry or medicine in my final year at school. I knew I wanted a job that linked science and working with people, but it wasn't until I completed a work experience placement that I found my answer. I met an enthusiastic dentist, and loved the creative and problem-solving side of the profession. I was hooked!

I had a brilliant time learning to refine my manual dexterity that have become lifelong skills. During the dental degree I gained so much knowledge, and a love for surgery, medicine and technology.

After my dental degree I got a house officer post in maxillofacial surgery, which is the equivalent of dental foundation training [1]. It gave me a taste for surgery and was an exciting introduction to hospital life. My subsequent posts gave me more experience, and

I soon realised that I really liked surgery and had an aptitude for it. I also had a supportive consultant who was kind, patient and encouraging.

I started my surgical career under supervision. I operated on wisdom teeth, jaw cysts, surgical treatment of facial fractures and harvested bone grafts for cleft repair. I knew that I had to go to medical school to become an oral & maxillofacial surgeon (OMFS), but research also caught my eye and, that's what I did next. I wanted to evaluate therapies that could improve patient outcomes, so applied for a Royal College of Surgeons Research Fellowship grant that covered my salary, and some running expenses while I studied for a PhD.

The PhD gave me opportunities to present my research at international conferences, sit on expert panels and help to set up multi-centre clinical trials. I met many inspiring people along the way.

I knew I wanted to be both a clinician and an academic and hadn't forgot about my desire to become a maxillofacial surgeon, so the next step after my PhD was medical school.

As a dental graduate I was able to do an accelerated medical degree in four years rather than five. I also worked evenings and weekends as a junior doctor in OMFS to help fund my medical training - and to keep my hands in clinical practice! It was a busy, but unbelievable chapter in my career.

I started foundation training [1] after graduation, which included posts in respiratory [2] medicine, clinical oncology [3] and general surgery. Then I took up core surgical training in general, vascular and orthopaedic surgery, and went on to complete five years of higher specialist training. Finally, I achieved my Certificate of Completion of Training [4] (CCT [5]) and my dream of becoming a Consultant Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon.

I was appointed a Consultant Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon at King's College Hospital (King's) and Honorary Senior Lecturer at King's College London (KCL). I was subsequently promoted to Reader. Much to my delight in 2021 I was promoted to full professor within King's College London, as the first dually-qualified (medical and dental) female oral and maxillofacial surgeon in UK to hold this academic position.

What I do

Expand / collapse

My work at King's is exciting and varied. I support a range of patients, who often have complex needs. We are at the centre of multidisciplinary practice, and the camaraderie of working alongside other specialties is something I love.

I work in a range of clinical areas including:

- craniofacial trauma
- orthognathic surgery (the correction of disproportion / imbalanced jaws)
- skin cancer surgery
- salivary gland disease
- surgical airway service.

On average I operate for just over a day per week. Surgery in facial deformity usually takes a few hours, but complex facial reconstruction following major trauma can last up to six hours or more– and may involve working with other specialties such as neurosurgeons and ophthalmology. Surgery to remove a wisdom tooth may take only a few minutes, while skin cancer cases, endoscopic salivary gland or jaw joint surgery might take around 30 to 45 minutes.

I lead ward rounds, which are an important part of junior doctor training. I am committed to giving my trainees the support, training and encouragement they need – it's central to what I do. I am always happy to provide advice or mentorship when asked.

Teaching is a big part of my academic career. I teach medical and dental undergraduates, foundation dentists, core dental, surgical and higher specialty trainees, as well as allied medical staff that include maxillofacial technicians and dental therapists.

Research is another key part of my work. I am the OMFS academic and the divisional research lead. I co-supervise PhD and postdoctoral research students, and examine MSc and PhDs from other universities. My team is also involved in several national OMFS research projects.

The best bits and challenges

Expand / collapse

I love my job because it is so very varied and diverse. Clinically, we operate on both hard and soft tissues in the head and neck. Our field also scan from the top of the head to the lower limbs – where we harvest flaps or tissue for jaw and or facial reconstruction. It is incredibly rewarding because our work can have such a huge impact on the quality of someone's life.

Patients often tell me they have been bullied because their jaws don't meet properly, and they have an imbalance of their face. Their lives can change dramatically for the better after surgery.

Working as part of a multidisciplinary team is extremely enjoyable and means our patients benefit from the highest standards of care. Nurturing trainees to develop and gain skills is also hugely rewarding.

Advances in technology are changing the way we work. There are exciting developments such as the delivery of training through simulation and virtual surgery to 3D planning and printing. My involvement with research enables me to contribute to the valuable progress evolving in maxillofacial surgery.

Oral and maxillofacial surgery also provides many opportunities to innovate. I am particularly interested in the psychological impact on our patients. The face is such an integral part of our identity. Injury or disease affecting someone's face can significantly affect their mental health, and as surgeons we are trained to consider the whole person and manage all our patients' needs.

Life outside work

Expand / collapse

It's really important to have a good work life balance. I enjoy both my work and spending time with my husband and young son. As a family we like eating out and going to concerts, we play tennis together and travel. I have a fantastic network of supportive family and friends, so I don't do it alone.

Career plans and top tips for others

Expand / collapse

My wish is to continue with the development of OMFS surgery through research and support and encourage OMFS trainees.

My top tips would be to:

- Follow your dreams and keep focused on your destination even though there might be occasional detours.
- Plan your career at each stage and set your yourself small achievable goals. Don't be afraid to explore different avenues along the way.
- Remember to enjoy and celebrate each and every achievement.

Links
[1] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Foundation_training [2] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Respiratory [3]

https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Oncology [4]
https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Certificate_of_completion_of_training [5]
https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#CCT