

"I'd like to inspire others who are over the age of 30 to retrain. I am 41 and about to start my career as a dental hygienist so it can be done!"

Songwriter and MasterChef contestant Jessica decided to retrain as a dental hygienist in her 30s, which opened a whole range of career opportunities.

Jessica Gardham

Dental hygiene student

Employer or university

Teeside University



How I got into the role

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I applied to be a dental nurse when I was 21. As soon as I stepped into the dental surgery, I knew this was where I wanted to work. But taking an extra qualification in oral health education opened my eyes to a different side of dental care. I found I had more one-on-one time when advising patients how to improve their oral health which was very rewarding. I started looking into dental hygiene as a career and realised it would give me more responsibility and I would be able to treat patients myself.

After 17 years' experience of working as a dental nurse, I took the plunge and decided to retrain as a dental hygienist.

However, changing careers in my mid-thirties had its challenges. I didn't have a maths GCSE, which I needed for the course. I took my future into my own hands and went back to school, attending classes one day a week after a full day at work.

I then followed this with a nine-month intensive Access to Higher Education Diploma in health science professions, which was challenging as it was held mostly online due to the pandemic.

Studying and working at the same time was hard. I also found it challenging to complete academic work after so many years out of education. But I overcame this by reminding myself of the future career I would have at the end of all my hard work and the people I would be able to help as a dental hygienist.

What I do

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I am still studying for my dental hygienist degree and due to graduate shortly. As part of my course, I complete placements at dental surgeries, which has allowed me to practice what I will be doing in the future.

Dental hygienists do all sorts of things. They prescribe dental x-rays, place temporary dressings into teeth and with extra training, they can perform tooth whitening with a prescription from a dentist. Being a dental hygienist is largely about helping people reduce their risk of oral diseases, such as gum disease and tooth decay. The focus is on how we can prevent these problems and tell patients how they can look after their health.

I'm excited to get started and can't wait to start helping patients with their oral health.

The best bits and challenges

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The best bit about my job is helping people regain their confidence and get their smile back.

This may be educating a patient on how to stop smoking, or supporting another in improving their oral hygiene so they can get braces or dental implants that improve their quality of life.

One of the main challenges in my job is getting people to realise how important it is to have good dental health. Encouraging them to change the way they look after their mouths can be very difficult, especially if they already have a certain way of doing things.

However, educating patients about how to improve not only the health of their mouth but their general health is so fulfilling. Being able to demonstrate understanding, show empathy and have patience in this job can work wonders and literally help to change someone's life.

Career plans and top tips for others

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There are lots of opportunities for me to progress in dental hygiene. I plan to take additional training in inhalation sedation so I can help nervous and anxious patients feel more comfortable and have their necessary treatments. I would also like to train in tooth whitening (on prescription of a dentist).

I would like to complete a master's degree in either public health or gum disease. I also love the idea of teaching and training the next generation of dental hygienists.

My top tips for pursuing my career path is to start by getting some work experience at a dental practice. Training as a dental nurse can be a good route into becoming a dental hygienist, since you'll learn how a dental practice works and even assist a hygienist to make sure you like the role before committing to study.

Most of all, I'd like to inspire others who are over the age of 30 to not be afraid to retrain and upskill. There are so many people out there that will have so much to offer the NHS. I am 41 years old and about to start my career as a dental hygienist so it can be done!

Life outside work

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As well as going to the gym, in my spare time I love to sing, write songs and play the guitar. I have won several awards for my song writing and I even designed and created my own website (www.jessgardham.co.uk ^[1]).

I also enjoy cooking and became a quarter finalist on BBC 1's MasterChef in 2018!

I think that it is so important to be able to have something that you enjoy outside of work so that you can return to work the next day fresh, recharged and ready for any challenges that may come your way!

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[1] <http://www.jessgardham.co.uk>