

# Transforming dental education through lived experiences

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## Introduction

When we think of a teacher, the first thing that comes to mind is someone who taught us maths, science or English during our years at primary or secondary school. We might also recall the clinicians and academics who guided us during our training as oral healthcare practitioners. The individuals, after years of study and professional development, have become dentists, dental therapists, doctors, teachers, researchers or clinical academics. Many have gone on to obtain additional qualifications (often in clinical education) making them exceptional individuals in their chosen fields.

Yet, despite this wealth of expertise, highly qualified educators report that they continue to learn from the very people they teach. For example, doctors acknowledge learning from their patients on a daily basis.<sup>1,2</sup> Patients might not be formally trained as educators, but they are often the most knowledgeable individuals when it comes to understanding the realities of their own conditions. Their lived experience constitutes a form of expertise that is increasingly recognised in the United States and the United Kingdom, where patient involvement in medical education is now well established. These individuals are also referred to as Experts by Experience (EE).<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

Experts by Experience can participate in a range of teaching initiatives, including giving presentations, contributing to small group discussions or providing personal tuition.<sup>7</sup> This approach not only enhances students' understanding of clinical conditions but also supports the development of communication, empathy and professional identity.<sup>8</sup>

Educating dental (BDS) or dental therapy and hygiene (DTH) students at Peninsula Dental School (PDS) is no exception. In collaboration with the local community, PDS places EEs at the centre of their training. The Plymouth-based wellbeing charity Well Connected is at the forefront of patient-led education, drawing on expertise in experiential learning and community engagement methodologies to support undergraduate education.<sup>9,10</sup>

Students studying BDS or DTH at PDS are expected to fulfil all the criteria outlined by the General Dental Council's Safe Practitioners Framework (SPF) to be considered 'safe' by the time they graduate. Domain A of this framework clearly outlines the clinical skills required to be considered a safe beginner.<sup>11</sup> One such skill states that students will need to have knowledge on a variety of diseases and long-term health conditions and understand how these are managed in a dental setting (C 1.4).<sup>11</sup> To achieve this goal, the Exploring Health Conditions programme, a Well Connected-led initiative, is delivered to BDS Year 4 students at the Knowledge Spa, Truro in the UK. The EEs who are diagnosed with long term health conditions such as renal failure, Ehlers Danlos syndrome and dementia are invited to 'teach' students in a small group setting.

During these sessions, students rotate between EEs, to hear about their health condition, as well as the daily challenges, impact on lifestyles, work and family relationships. This is also an opportunity to discuss experiences within dental settings, and their approaches to maintaining oral health. Encounters of this nature expose students to perspectives that cannot easily



Francesca, one of the Experts by Experience (EE) educating BDS Year 4 students by sharing her experiences and challenges

be replicated in lectures or textbooks, aligning with established principles of experiential learning.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

One of the EEs who has supported this initiative is Francesca (pictured with this article), who lives with several long-term health conditions, including photosensitive epilepsy, which requires her to wear special glasses to avoid the risk of seizures during her dental appointments. The opportunity for students to listen to Francesca as she recounts and reflects on her experiences of accessing health care services enables them to recognise the need to ask about adjustments, avoiding any unnecessary risks as well as displaying kindness and empathy for others. When asked about her experiences, she said the following: 'I feel very passionately about raising awareness for the chronically ill and disabled community. When sharing my experience with the PDS students each year I am always warmed by the students' knowledge, curiosity and willingness to ask questions and suggest adaptations if I were to be their patient'.

The Exploring Health Conditions programme is all about including the voices and experiences of members of the public who can discuss the reality of living with a long-term health condition with authenticity and relevance. They encourage and inspire dental professionals of the future and have contributed significantly to the education of students at PDS,

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helping them to better understand and comprehend the intensity long term health conditions have on everyday life.

In conclusion, the Exploring Health Conditions programme demonstrates that education is most powerful when it embraces authenticity and collaboration. By placing patients at the heart of learning, the collaboration between Well Connected and PDS has helped students to foster empathy, adaptability, as well as a deeper understanding of the human experience throughout their healthcare journey. These encounters remind us that healthcare is not just about treating conditions; it is about listening, learning, and building trust. In doing so, we prepare future professionals to deliver care that is both safe and profoundly compassionate. ■

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## Faculty of Dental Surgery, RCPSG welcomes new Dean

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow (RCPSG) has welcomed Vicki Greig as the new Dean and Vice President of Dental Surgery. She was joined by Craig Mather and Albert Yeung who were elected Vice Deans.

Ms Greig is a Consultant Oral Surgeon currently working within NHS Lothian, previously working in NHS Grampian where she chaired the health board's Managed Clinical Network in Oral Surgery.

She was the first dental trainee in Scotland to be awarded a Scottish Clinical Leadership Fellowship, providing the opportunity to work between the office of the Chief Dental Officer for Scotland, and the Dental Directorate within NHS Education for Scotland.

Ms Greig has already held several roles within the College, including exam convener, Director of the MFDS exam preparation course, Ordinary Member of the Dental Executive and Education Boards, before serving as Vice Dean and then Dean Elect over the last year.

On her appointment, Ms Greig said: 'I am incredibly humbled to be elected as Dean. It's a privilege and a responsibility I take very seriously.'

'One of the things I have learned from Professor Christine Goodall [immediate past Dean], is that in this role we are custodians. Everything we do should



From left to right: Albert Yeung, Vicki Greig, Craig Mather. Top centre: Jamie Dickie (Director of Dental Education)

benefit those who come after us. I'll work incredibly hard to uphold this value.

'Over the next three years I'll work to ensure dentistry remains visible and part of the national conversation as we navigate shared challenges around inequality, wellbeing, workforce and sustainable practice.'

'I'm committed to working with the College team to ensure the Faculty provides support and educational opportunities that reflect the needs of our Members and Fellows.'

Ms Greig is joined by Vice Deans Craig Mather and Albert Yeung.

Mr Mather is a Senior Clinical Lecturer/Honorary Consultant in Oral Surgery at the University of Glasgow's School of Medicine

Dentistry and Nursing. He is the Deputy Director of Dental Education whose remit includes QA, Dental Admissions and the International Partner Dental Schools programme.

Mr Yeung has been the Consultant in Dental Public Health of NHS Lanarkshire since 2007. He is an Honorary Clinical Senior Lecturer of the University of Glasgow and also a Professional Adviser to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. He has served our College as Director of Dental Faculty Regional Advisors Board, Member of Dental Education and Professional Development Board, and as an examiner for ISFE and MFDS.