

HYGIENE AND THE CITY

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Hygienists **Rumana Hussein** and **Sylvia Van Blerk** love the flexibility their career affords them. Their perfect life balance is in direct contrast to some of Rumana's high-flying patients however, for whom a hygiene appointment is a well-earned break, writes **Julie Ferry**.

Flexibility seems to be the essential ingredient in attracting people to a career in dental hygiene. Whether your reasons are personal or professional, having the power to arrange work around the demands of everyday modern life is central to many hygienists' enjoyment of the job.

Rumana Hussein, a hygienist who works at Dentic, a private practice in the heart of London loves the many choices that her career affords her. After nearly 14 years in the profession, she has worked as a hygienist, on and off, in lots of different practices, established a training course for dental nurses, flirted with practice management and now fits her career around her family.

'Hygiene is great if you have a family. I work four days a week and I think that is quite a lot as many hygienists, who are working mums, only work two or three days. It

also gives you freedom. I am going to India soon for a couple of months to visit my family and I am taking my three-year-old son over there with me. You couldn't do that in other careers.'

Rumana's day commences at 9am after a convenient 25 minute commute on the tube from her home in Ilford. With 40 minutes allocated for each patient, she has enough time to 'give them a really good treatment' and spend time with them giving oral hygiene advice.

As the practice is in the City, Rumana sees her fair share of patients that work on the trading floor, but as she explains, it is never for long.

'We are directly behind the stock exchange so we get a lot of traders, brokers, investment bankers and employees from all the main financial companies. We do have quite a few regulars but because of the nature of the job,

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they may be with us for a year or two and will then either have to vanish off to China with work, move on to another company or sometimes they will have been made redundant. That's the problem with the City, you do get quite a bit of movement of patients.'

She has noticed that particularly this group of patients are often quite different to her other patients and consequently are looking for different things from their visit to the hygienist. 'People are very stressed, that's for sure in the City,' says Rumana.

'I think that is because of the working lifestyle they have. I try to make the surgery's environment really relaxed by playing chill out music to make it a break away for them. It is almost therapeutic and most of the clients say they are really happy with it. Like with any patients, you do get a couple that you have to go over things over and over again with and you feel like you are hitting your head against a brick wall, but generally they come out very motivated and wanting to buy the products. We get them to book in for their three month appointment straight away

and so they usually come back.'

An essential part of her drive to give the patients what they are looking for is Rumana's tongue manicures. She admits that they are not something that most hygienists do, but they have proved to be a huge success with her patients and are something that she would recommend to others.

'My tongue manicures are so popular. What I do is everything I would do in a normal hygiene visit but at the end of that I go through tongue brushing and scraping. I do breath tests to get a reading of the patient's breath and then I have a look at their tongue and explain why it is important to clean it. I clean it using a tongue brush and then use a breath freshening strip afterwards. It is a very short process, only about four minutes long but we do that at the end of every initial hygiene session. The patients love it and it is something they say they haven't really been aware of. Our tongue brushes sell like hot cakes here.'

Sylvia Van Blerk is another hygienist that likes the flexibility that her job offers her. After a career spanning a stint in Harley

Street, teaching students and working in practice, Sylvia is contented with the work/life balance and the sense of satisfaction her role brings to her life.

'I work in two practices just outside York, one in Upper Poppleton for two days a week and another in Dunnington for one day and the first Saturday of every month. I try to get there about 8.30am and my first patient is at 9am. At 8.30am I switch things on, go through my day list, see if there is anything a bit different and then I normally manage to have a cup of coffee before I start, which is very important.'

Although, both practices are private, Sylvia doesn't have a nurse assisting her on a day-to-day basis. However, she doesn't find this difficult as the team work together and help her out whenever she needs it.

'The patients are every 20 minutes and I have no help. I have six sets of instruments, so in theory I can work for two hours without needing new instruments. At both practices the nurses are very helpful and will help if they are around but if not, you just put

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them in the ultra sonic bath and then, as if by magic, someone else will take them out and do everything. It usually runs smoothly because the whole onus is on me. If it doesn't run smoothly then it is my fault.'

'Paradoxically, when I have worked in NHS practices, I had a nurse. I smile at that and think it is a bit bizarre. But in my NHS practice I only had fifteen-minute appointments. In a way, fifteen-minute appointments with a nurse are the same as having twenty minutes without a nurse. So, both instances work quite nicely.'

Sylvia finds that seeing challenging patients is the most rewarding for her whether that be within the NHS, where she worked until recently, or the private sector. She still enjoys the challenge of 'turning the patient round'.

'We have a lot of new patients here. It is nice for the practice but also nice for me, as every hygienist will know, it is good to have a challenge. The other day I had a patient that hadn't been to the dentist since 1972. Interestingly, from my point of view his mouth was relatively healthy. What prompted him to come was that his brother had been

diagnosed with oral cancer and he saw what was happening to his brother and thought, 'How can I be such a wimp?' He was very upfront about that and I thought that he was quite brave. If you have a patient that comes in with a quite unhealthy mouth then the challenge or the opportunity is to get the mouth healthy.'

It is this love of a challenge that Sylvia cites as one of the benefits of working in the NHS. 'When you are working in an NHS practice you get a better buzz,' says Sylvia.

'I find, as a very general comment, that the patients are more appreciative because they don't have the luxury of having enough money to keep on spending it on their teeth.'

'In my time I have worked in Harley Street but it is very hard to motivate people that think money will buy them everything. It won't buy a clean mouth, you have to spend time doing it whereas someone that has come through the door of an NHS practice tends to listen more.'

Despite this, her move at Christmas 2003 from an NHS practice in Doncaster to the private practices she works at now, was motivated not by career ambitions, but by the

desire to maintain her work/life balance.

'The reason that I decided to change practices was largely to do with traffic. They built a bypass on my side of town and so all of the traffic was shunted there, adding nearly 20 minutes on to my journey. Life is too short to spend it in the car.'

Sylvia explains that it is this need to sustain a high quality of life, more than anything else, which has ensured that hygiene is the perfect career for her.

'Hygiene has proved to be extremely flexible and I think the financial rewards are commensurate with what we do. It is very flexible with having children. My children have grown and flown now, but when you have young children it is great to be able to fit your hours in with school hours. There aren't that many jobs where you can pick and choose.'

'You know when you are going to start and know when you are going to finish. We don't have any emergencies so what you see in your day book is what you are going to get'

Listening to Rumana and Sylvia, it sounds like hygiene has all the right features for those that want a stress-free but rewarding career.