

# Juggling excellence

Senior lecturer and specialist orthodontist Parmjit Singh explains how he stays focused and motivated whilst maintaining a heavy workload



## Can you tell us a bit about your background?

**PS:** Before starting my undergraduate training I worked in broadcasting for many years as a producer and presenter for BBC local radio. I decided the media was fun but not really what I wanted to do for a career, so, I went on to study dentistry at Newcastle, a dental school and city that I have very fond memories of. I moved to London after qualifying and did VT and spent two years at three London undergraduate teaching hospitals in junior hospital posts before getting a place to specialise in orthodontics, which set me on the path to where I am now.

## What or who made you choose a career in orthodontics?

After spending a year in VT in South London, I decided general dental practice wasn't for me. There were lots of different reasons for that, however, I was sure I wanted to do some sort of specialist training. The junior hospital posts I did gave me a flavour for two disciplines I enjoyed, restorative dentistry and orthodontics. I was undecided which was going to be for me so I let fate decide. I thought I'd apply for both and whichever I got into first would be the one I would do. That ended up being orthodontics!

## Can you tell us about your training?

I did my specialist registrar training between the Royal London Hospital and Whipps Cross Hospital and each unit gave me a different perspective to hospital practice. After finishing the three years of specialist training, I went on to do an FTTA that was another two years and I was split between the Royal London Hospital and Ipswich Hospital. That prepared me for consultant life, and to play the political game that I never really got the hang of. Needless to say, I only spent a few years working as a locum consultant at both Ipswich Hospital and Chelsea and Westminster Hospital.

## What are your current roles?

After my stints as a locum consultant I went back into primary care and now work about two clinical days a week with Ten Dental a general practice providing specialist services where I am one of four orthodontists. I'm also a senior clinical lecturer in orthodontics at BPP University two days a week and look after the academic modules for the MCLin Dent in Orthodontics, a three-year part-time programme for general dentists who want to have some enhanced skills in orthodontics.

## Why do you enjoy teaching?

Throughout my career, both in broadcasting and dentistry, I've had some great teachers: Sameena Bashey at BBC Radio Newcastle, Serpil Djemal at the Royal London/King's and Simon Ash at Whipps Cross. They all had the skills to motivate and enthuse people and made coming into work and study something I looked forward to. I wanted to emulate them so did a certificate in teaching and got involved with training different members of the dental team. Undergraduate teaching was a part of my FTTA appointment and I was able to bring together the skills in teaching I had both acquired from previous teachers as well as the theory I had learnt in my teaching certificate. Stimulating an interest in orthodontics in these students and then seeing them develop gave me a real buzz. And then seeing several of the students I had taught end up sitting next to me as orthodontic trainees at an orthodontic meeting really made me feel I'd

succeeded as a teacher! That made me want to be involved in teaching more and so I joined the orthodontic faculty at BPP University where I now work closely with one of my mentors, Simon Ash.

## What do you think is the secret to your success?

Respect your students the way you would want to be respected. I've worked in adult teaching environments where it's insisted upon you address your teachers formally! I've always insisted on being addressed informally by students and rather than that respect being insisted upon, it comes with time through your actions! For instance, sometimes a student calls me 'Sir' and I see they do it not because I insist that's how I'm address (I prefer 'Parm') but because they respect me and feel they should address me like that. Everything else falls into place if this mutual respect is there: the student works hard, they engage during teaching sessions and give you constructive feedback to enhance both their learning experience and improve my teaching style.

## What are your opinions on short-term orthodontics?

There are real polarised views regarding short-term orthodontics (STO) in the dental community. Some feel any dentist should carry out orthodontics while others think orthodontics should only be provided by a specialist. I think we have to accept that we live in a patient-centred and demand driven profession and as a specialist I want to help my fellow general dentists to acquire some skills in orthodontics to safely and competently carry out simple and straightforward treatments that give their patients the outcomes they want and make their general dentistry easier, less invasive and more predictable.

There is still a place for the ideal Class I finish and that has many benefits but we have to remember that with the adult dentition, there are many factors that may compromise the outcome so going for that perfect finish may not be in the patient's best interest. Just straightening the 'social six' and retaining is



a perfectly reasonable option if a patient has been presented with all the options and has made an informed decision to proceed with just straightening those front teeth. Who does that treatment? Well a couple of days at a hotel learning to put brackets on and change arch wires is just not going to give you an appropriate level of competency. The course I am involved with at BPP University for example has almost the entire first year focusing on assessment, diagnosis and planning! I can teach my young teenage niece how to put brackets on in the right place but to get her to assess, diagnose and treatment plan from an orthodontic perspective is a challenge at another level! And just as important is knowing what your limitations are!

## Describe your typical working week.

I spend on average two days a week in clinical practice at Ten Dental in Balham where I work with a range of other orthodontic and non-orthodontic specialists. The other two days I am involved with teaching and my work at BPP University. Although I might spend very little time in the classroom each week,

there are many things I'm doing behind the scenes: planning modules, recruiting lecturers, updating the VLE, developing assessments, dealing with prospective and existing student queries, marking, quality assuring...the list is almost endless. I'm involved with question writing and examining for the RCS and sit on the orthodontic committee for the NEBDN as well as do some clinical advisory work for the GDC. This means that my fifth day of the week is nearly always busy.

## How do you stay abreast of modern techniques?

I guess the standard answer would be that I attend lectures, meetings and conferences, and not always limited to orthodontics to ensure my knowledge remains up to date across the board. However, earlier this year, I was approached to develop and deliver a diploma in orthodontics for general dentists in Ghana. This meant not just delivering teaching material on my favourite subjects but having to go through the entire orthodontic curriculum and ensure I was able to teach it to a high standard and with contemporary

techniques. This was a lot of work, not just in terms of preparation but also travelling out to West Africa to do the teaching. I now feel as though my knowledge level is almost on par with what it was when I was sitting my membership examination back in 2007.

## Professionally, what are you most proud of?

Doing the right thing and standing by what is ethically and morally right. At times, I've had a bumpy ride through my training and even my undergraduate tutor had said of me 'if they want a yes man, employers should look elsewhere'. I know I've burnt some bridges over the years but at least I sleep well at night knowing I've done right and not done things for my own selfish gains.

## Where do you get your motivation and drive from?

I enjoy what I do. I think the motivation and drive just becomes an integral part of you when you're in that kind of mindset.

## How do you relax in your spare time? How do you balance work and family life?

When I was just doing clinical work, it was easy, when I left the clinic, I could switch off. Now, with the teaching commitments and other roles I do, if I don't regularly check emails and stay on top of tasks, it can become very busy. Switching off is now more difficult but I still ensure I have time for family and a social life by meticulously planning my diary. I think that's part of the OCD that comes from being an orthodontist (at least for me)! Cycling, trekking and baking are all favourite pastimes as well as getting into overalls and doing some DIY. Reading in the subject area of spirituality is also something that I'm getting into as well as learning to speak Spanish.

## Do you have any regrets? What has been your biggest mistake?

I think I only got the right work-life balance after BDS. I was a real bookworm and spent hours in the library. Looking back now, I wish I had enjoyed more of the social aspects of student life.

## What are your plans for the future?

I'm enjoying the range of things I'm doing now with the excellent team at Ten Dental in Balham and at BPP University. I don't plan too much in the future because you never know what's around the corner: in the words of the economist John Maynard Keynes 'in the long term we are all dead'!

## Fact file

**Qualifications:** BDS (Ncl), MFDS (RCS Edin), MSc (Lond), MOrth (RCS Eng), FDS Orth (RCS Eng), CILT (Lond)

**Position:** Senior clinical lecturer in orthodontics and specialist orthodontist

**Dental interests:** Retention regimes for the long-term and teaching

**Interests out of dentistry:** Cycling, trekking and DIY