

# Positive thinking

Guy Hiscott catches up with dentistry's rising star Mike Gow to talk about his approach, patient care – and being the best young dentist in the UK

Life is good for the best young dentist in the UK – and not just because he's been rudely pulled out of a training session to talk to *Dentistry* magazine.

For Mike Gow, claiming the title last December was really just the tip of the iceberg. He's still working at Glasgow's cutting-edge Berkeley Clinic, treating anxious patients. But that's not to say he's been resting on his laurels.

The dedication to patient wellbeing that marked him out at last year's awards still burns brightly, and in Jamie Newlands – the principal – he's found a kindred spirit. Their winning partnership now sees Mike on his way to becoming a partner in the business, at the cusp of a major practice expansion, and the happiest he's ever been with his dentistry in his life.

## The road less travelled

Mike stormed to the top of the profession last year when he picked up the title of best young dentist for both Scotland and the whole of the UK.

But he's not your typical dentist. The in-house sedationist at his practice, Mike's main interest lies in treating phobic patients.

The nature of his work demands a varied skill set – one that includes a somewhat esoteric entry in the shape of hypnosis. This isn't the hypnosis of primetime Saturday night television – it's a serious clinical technique, and one with an evidence base that's growing with its cachet.

Mike – who happens to be the president of the British Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis (Scotland) – is leading the cause from the front. He struck a huge blow for awareness of the technique last year when he was involved with the very first implant case in the world to be carried out entirely without anaesthesia – hypnosis stepping into the breach instead.

But Mike is quick to stress that, for all its exotic allure, hypnosis is still ultimately a means to an end: 'My main



interest is in phobic patients and phobia management, and the hypnosis is just part of that.

'I've become well-known for the hypnosis because it's a bit more unusual, but my treatment methods are more about whatever is most suitable for the patient.'

This is a common theme throughout everything he does, and one that has led him to consider some approaches to dentistry a little differently

He explains: 'I remember being told as a student that – especially with anxious patients – the very last teeth that you work on are the front teeth, because, if you do them first, they might not come back.

'But in my experience, I've found that most phobic patients hate their teeth so much that they're embarrassed by them and have no motivation to brush – because they hate them.

'If you build that trust, and work on their front teeth first, it gives them the motivation to start looking after their teeth better and keep appointments. I've certainly never had patients not coming back because I've worked on their front teeth first.

'I think that's a bit different to the general philosophy in dentistry.'

Perhaps it's a result of working with phobic patients – or perhaps it's why he is able to work so effectively with them – but Mike never loses sight of what the patient actually wants, which is something he's keen for more dentists to consider.

'I think that, quite often, we try to guess what our patients want. But one of the key things

in phobia management, and one of the first things I ask a phobic patient, is: "What can I do to help you? Why have you come here?" Because once they tell me their goals, I can then help move towards them.

Mike maintains that this should be true for any patient. If you don't establish their goals first, you may never meet their expectations, no matter what treatment plans you make.

'If somebody comes in and the main thing they want is for their teeth to look better, but I start telling them about fillings, inlays and extractions on the molar teeth, then it might be enough to put them off coming back.

'When I know that appearance is the main thing for them, then that's the first and the main goal that we're working for – the other treatment is of course discussed and carried out, but I don't labour the things that aren't a significant factor for them.'

## Patient focus

For all that, some of his approach is a little off the beaten track, his general philosophy is as straightforward as they come.

He says: 'For me, dentistry is about looking after people; it's about good service and good care.

'I think a lot of people with phobias and anxieties somehow feel ashamed of their teeth and their fear. They feel like they're wasting your time, or that their problem isn't something that's worthy of help. There are a lot of negative self-esteem issues involved with it, so my philosophy is good service, making people feel looked after, and



Mike collecting his award in Leicester last year

genuinely caring about them.

'There are a lot of intricacies when it comes to dealing with patients. No two cases are the same, but the overriding thing should be a real concern and care for your patients. You can't fake it – it has to be genuine.'

As a result, his appointment book is a far cry from those of most dentists. Because the nature of the cases he treats is more demanding, Mike sees four patients a day, spending as much time with each one as they need.

He uses a lot of sedation in practice, but often sees new patients for hypnosis consultations or to work on treatment plans, too. The other patients he sees come in for lengthier appointments – the idea being to use a combination of hypnosis and sedation to get through a significant amount of treatment in one sitting.

With extremely phobic patients, he does it all – the sedation and the dentistry.

Where there is more leeway, he can work with other members of the team which has given rise to opportunities he's grasped with relish.

The Berkeley Clinic is one of the most high tech practices in the UK. Its principal – Jamie Newlands – was the first dentist in the country to receive 3M's new digital Lava chairside oral scanner. Mike is full of praise for the environment that is letting him spread his wings.

'Jamie is one of the most skilful dentists I've ever met,' he says. 'I've been really lucky to work with him; he's introduced me to a whole range of other dental things like Cerec, and the Lava oral scanner.

'Under his guidance, I'm starting to do things clinically that I've never done before. My dentistry has evolved so much in the last year.'

Tying in some of these new technologies with his work makes a lot of sense to Mike,

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A world first: Mike's hypnosis allowed an implant to be placed without any anaesthesia

patients. I think it's an exciting time for dentistry, to be honest.'

The surroundings have helped give Mike a love of technology. He explains: 'I think this is where dentistry is going in the future. It's just a question of what other barriers or restrictions might prevent it – things like initial set up costs and the like.'

'Practically speaking, I don't think they're particularly difficult techniques to use – but the results are astonishing.'

#### Reaping the rewards

There is no way to doubt Mike's enthusiasm for his work, or the depth of feeling he has for his patients. When recognition came knocking in the form of the Dentistry Awards, it was undoubtedly deserved.

'I was very pleased for dentistry that phobia management and hypnosis were considered important enough

that someone working in those fields could be recognised,' he says. 'I was really pleased that it helped raise the profile of these things.'

'Obviously, on a personal level it's great to gain the recognition of your peers for doing a job that you love, too!'

But for all that, it's clear that for Mike, the real reward is in the results he achieves.

He says: 'It's very satisfying doing good dentistry, and sometimes that alone can change somebody's life. But when you see somebody who's been avoiding social situations, or hasn't got a partner or a job because of their phobia and how bad they feel about their teeth – to be able to turn that around is amazingly rewarding.'

'You're genuinely changing people's lives. It's just a phenomenal feeling to be able to help another human being in that way.'

He can appreciate that his path isn't for everyone though, acknowledging that time pressures for most dentists mean that phobic patients may not be their favourites.

'I'm not saying that dentists don't care,' he stresses. 'But it definitely makes their jobs more difficult. I can allow these patients all the time that they need, so I avoid that pressure.'

So, how does the man whose job is calming other people down relax himself at the end of the day?

The answer is refreshingly simple: 'I've got a young family, so I enjoy my time with them. I've bought a house in the area where I grew up. It's quite rural, so it's a very relaxing place to be.'

Not that it's always such plain sailing, as he explains: 'Of course, I still manage to take a huge amount of work home with me!'

too: 'I'm able to treat phobic patients in a single session and get their crown and inlay work done. Where patients have a gag reflex, the digital imaging means that impressions are often not required.'

'I've never been happier with the actual dentistry I'm doing, plus it's easier on the patients – and they're getting restorations that are going to last longer.'

'It's just getting rid of so many barriers for phobic

#### Early starter

In many ways, it's been a long time coming – but only when you consider how early his interest in dentistry was first piqued. 'I became interested in dentistry when I was about 12,' he explains. 'One of my neighbours was Bill Smith, quite a well-known oral surgeon at Glasgow Dental School. Bill showed me round the school and liked what I saw.'

'I was one of these kids who never really had to have any dental treatment beyond a scale and polish, so I thought it would be an easy job!'

The hypnosis side of things came from his father – a doctor who did a lot of forensic hypnosis – but it wasn't until university that the idea of combining the two came to him.



You could be one of the winners of the Dentistry Awards 2009! The deadline for entries is 11 September – gain the recognition you deserve and enter by calling Elisa on 01923 851734 or visit [www.dentistry.co.uk/awards2009](http://www.dentistry.co.uk/awards2009) for an entry brochure.



Dr Michael A Gow BDS (Gla) MSc Hyp (Lon) practices at The Berkeley Clinic in Glasgow.

He was voted as the 6th most influential person in UK dentistry by readers of *Dentistry* magazine earlier this year.

He is president of the British Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis (Scotland) and teaches on the society's training modules (visit [www.bsmdh-scot.com](http://www.bsmdh-scot.com)). Mike has a Masters in Hypnosis Applied to Dentistry from University College London and is now a tutor and examiner for The Hypnosis Unit UK on its diploma modules (visit [www.hypnosisunituk.com](http://www.hypnosisunituk.com)).

He also provides free advice to phobic patients through the website [www.dentalfearcentral.org](http://www.dentalfearcentral.org).

For more information on Mike or the practice, visit [www.whatfear.com](http://www.whatfear.com) or [www.berkeleyclinic.com](http://www.berkeleyclinic.com).