

Dental nurses given a drilling

Coatbridge College's state-of-the-art facilities have given budding practitioners new training opportunities to chew on

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A ROOM with 14 phantom heads sounds like science fiction. It even looks like it when the wooden door in the plush new building is pushed open to reveal what lies beyond. But there is nothing fictional about the facilities that fill the clinical skills room at Coatbridge College's new school of dental studies.

"This is state-of-the-art stuff," says head of school Jennifer Lowe, selecting a dental tool from a stand at the futuristic station near the door, and advancing on a flesh-coloured head with its mouth open. "We've got a special camera here," she says, placing it inside the mouth.

"That means the lecturer can demonstrate techniques and they're shown on the screen up above. At

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the same time they're on each of the other 13 screens around the room, as well as on the big plasma on the wall. That means every student can see exactly what's going on. It's simulated learning, so everything is fully functional."

She pulls a drill from the stand and demonstrates with the high-pitched, toe-curling whine, familiar to all of us: "When I taught clinical skills, I'd have half-a-dozen students around a chair and the head like this, so there was no way they could all see clearly what was going on."

Officially opened a month ago at Strathclyde Business Park, and having grown in a few years from a couple of SVQ classes in dental nursing, the college's dental school now offers a wide range of courses in a brand-new, beautifully equipped environment.

Besides the clinical skills room, the school also possesses two teaching rooms with dental chairs, a decontamination room, office and admin space and a lavish reception area for role-play. Courses offered match the facilities in range and ambition, says Ms Lowe.

"There is really only one qualifi-

cation enabling professional registration – SVQ or NVQ level 3 in dental nursing. But that's quite a high level, which would exclude a number of the learners attracted into the profession from the area we serve.

"That's a challenge for us," says Ms Lowe. "We have both school-leavers and mature students with strong practical skills, but they'll often need some support to pass exams and gain registration."

Classes at Intermediate 1 and 2 and Higher now provide the stepping stones some students need, while the more ambitious will, from September, be able to extend their qualifications upwards.

"I've been working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority to develop a new HND in dental nursing," says Ms Lowe. "I believe it's a first in the UK and that we're the only training providers offering it."

The demand for higher qualifications arises from changes in recent years to the practice of dentistry, which – like medicine – now allows nurses and other professionals to deliver skills and treatment previously the sole preserve of the dentist.

"Dental nurses are becoming far more active in patient care and the clinical side of dentistry. So they can now take impressions of teeth. They can do X-rays. They develop trainees. They'll become the practice managers. Things are changing fast. The HND will be a powerful qualification for these people."

The dental school had its origins in the education of dental nurses, and that remains a focus for the future, says Ms Lowe. But both the new facilities and the management philosophy allow scope for constructively crossing dentistry divisions.

"Traditionally dentists, hygienists and therapists trained in dental hospitals," she explains. "But dentists and other dental care professionals are now interested in the facility we have here and the possibilities it provides for their own CPD. In the phantom heads room, for instance, a dentist could experience what it's like to be a dental nurse."

It is, she says, all about integrated training: "We now have the facilities and expertise to provide professionals at all levels with lifelong learning."



A student gets to grips with new areas of expertise in Coatbridge College's cutting-edge clinical skills room.

Cutting their teeth

Teaching methods are keeping pace with modern equipment at the dental school, says lecturer Kate Wilson: "We had HMIE in recently and they commented on the good practice in one class where we were preparing students for their exam, using activities and role-play rather than 20 questions."

The Curriculum for Excellence purpose and capacities are displayed prominently in the staff's working-room. They are a strong influence,

says Ms Wilson, who is "passionate" about building confidence and getting the best out of all of the students.

"We always did, but it's become a clearer focus in recent years," she adds. "We have a wide mix of students, from people straight out of school to those who've been working for years and want to retrain. Even if they don't have qualifications at first, you help them see that they do have the qualities needed to become a good dental nurse."

Working in teams with assigned roles for each student is particularly

useful, she says: "They do research. They prepare presentations. They bring each other on. If a student isn't confident, the rest of the group helps that person and brings on their skills. Nobody is isolated or made to feel inadequate."

A measure of the dental school's success is the waiting list for aspiring students. It's a mixed blessing, she says: "It means you have to turn people away and tell them that if they apply again next year they will get in."

"I always think it's a shame. I don't want to turn people away."