

Tuning into patients' needs

A look at how one orthodontist is hitting the right note with his musician patients.



Richard Williams

Orthodontist Richard Williams has built a reputation within the musical community as a clinician who excels at treating wind instrument players. The reason he is rated so highly among his musician patients is that he understands their challenges and anxieties. The embouchure, the position in which a wind-instrument player holds the reed or mouthpiece to their lips, is vital to the musician's technique and skill. The fact that Richard is a wind instrument player himself and had orthodontics as a teenager makes him empathetic and authoritative.

He explains that his father played the French horn and he followed in his footsteps. "I started playing when I was seven. I was very keen to start having lessons. My father told me that if I could learn to play the C Major arpeggio in a day, he would find me a teacher." That same day, Richard learned the arpeggio, and was soon having lessons.

All his family were musical. His mother played the oboe, his sister the flute and together they could form a Chamber quartet. Richard was so adept at the French horn he took Grade 8 when he was just 12 years old and he joined the National Youth Orchestra. As a teenager, however, he met a crossroads. Although he could have gone professional as a musician, the



Richard Williams as a young boy, at an event for horn-players

lure of healthcare was greater.

His father, David Williams, was an orthodontist, working as a Consultant at UCH in the early 1980s before moving into specialist practice, and Richard decided he would train as a dentist. It was helping his father to earn pin money that piqued his interest in dentistry.

"I used to pour plaster study models to make a bit of pocket money. I could see the way the teeth changed between the outset of treatment and completion and imagined the difference it would make to people.

"Once I qualified, I decided I wanted to specialise and I was drawn to orthodontics because of the mechanics involved in the specialty and the positive changes it can make to patients' smiles. It wasn't what I was planning, but it seems it was my destiny." After he gained his specialist qualification in 2001, Richard worked as an associate in several practices, one of them Ewell Orthodontics. Soon afterwards, Faiza Lewis, already a

friend from university, also took on an associate role there. When the owner of Ewell Orthodontics decided to sell in 2012, Richard and Faiza formed a partnership and took over the practice.

From the outset, patients who are wind-instrument playing musicians have been referred to Richard or sought his knowledge and experience themselves. His own treatment experience by his father inspires him still. His father also recognised the difficulties faced by wind-instrument players and had an interest in making modifications to try to reduce the effect of braces on the embouchure. "By reducing the depth of the brackets, they were less prominent and had less impact on my playing. By understanding the embouchure, I am more easily able to support young musicians. I understand how instruments pose a variety of challenges. The size of the mouthpiece and whether or not the instrument has a single or double reed can make a difference. But so much depends on

the personality and the will-power of the patient.”

He is very encouraging of his patients. “Even with my tips and advice there is no doubt that getting used to playing wind-instruments with braces can be tricky and frustrating. I tell my patients that with more practise, not less, they will adapt. Using specially adapted wax over the appliance certainly helps but I find this is eventually not needed.”

He has particular advice for brass-players as tightening the lip muscle to achieve the higher notes will involve pulling back against the braces more, which could be challenging. “When first in braces, brass players may want to concentrate more on the low-register where the pressure of the mouthpiece is less, to help acclimatise to playing in braces. With practise, their full-range should return.”

Ironically, in some ways, braces may help technique, says Richard.

“The more brass-players pucker their lips, the greater the muscle between mouthpiece and brace. This not only increases the comfort of playing but also improves the embouchure. There is no reason why the patient’s musical ability cannot continue to improve, even through orthodontic treatment.”

He continued: “Since I understand the exam and career structure of musicians I can advise as to the best timing for treatment. I would certainly not recommend fitting a brace within weeks of a grade exam for example!

The further into their music career a patient is, the more I need to balance the undoubted benefits of treatment with the potential effect on their playing.”

As a hobby musician, Richard continues to play in an orchestra and at community events. He also encourages his two sons who both have musical abilities. Orthodontics is his other passion and at work he continues to specialise in musician patients, ensuring they have the care and support that he enjoyed.

Richard’s advice to colleagues who find themselves treating a musician is:

- Be understanding – the embouchure is both precious and potentially elusive.
- Be encouraging – the musician should practice once they are in braces in order to learn to adapt – brass players should acclimatise to their braces by initially practising notes in the lower register.
- Be flexible – consider Invisalign – musicians may find this easier and could play with aligners in situ.

Filler