

Achieving the ultimate dream

Versha Miyanger speaks to **Sunita Verma** from the outstanding and award winning Sparkle Dental Boutique about her life, work ethos, her team and the secrets to her success

Sparkle Dental Boutique is located on a busy road in Hanwell, west London. The converted 1930s house really stands out in the street with its modern signage, beautiful colour schemes and welcoming reception area. Sunita's surgery area has an attractive water feature within a courtyard viewed through a floor-to-ceiling window that can be seen by the patient from the surgery chair. So what has led Sunita to this tranquil and highly flourishing dental practice?

Background

'I was born in Southall, West London and started off by going to the local state school and afterwards going to Acton College in a predominately Asian area. I was lucky at school – I seemed to enjoy every subject and was a good all-rounder. I loved working with my hands at a very early age and was especially into intricate, fiddly and artistic projects such as embroidery and sewing. None of my family were dentists, but one of my cousins suggested it would be a good field to go into. I did A Levels in Biology, Chemistry and Maths and qualified from Guy's Hospital in 1990.

During my time there as an undergraduate I worked under Dr BG Smith. We were working on a case of very worn teeth. The patient had a medical condition and I found that case very challenging. I did all the lab work myself and it was from then that I decided I loved cosmetic dentistry and that was the path I wanted to follow. I then entered into a year's vocational training in Hounslow, Middlesex. I will be forever grateful to Dr Davinderpal Kooner, who was my mentor and trainer in that first year. He helped me understand that you have to have your heart in what you do. He acted as my mentor and guided me into having the clinical skills I have today.

I subsequently worked as an associate for seven years in a few practices in West London. During this time, I had absolutely no intention or desire of ever owning my own practice. I loved my life as an associate and enjoyed the freedom this allowed to pursue my other passions in life. I also went to lots of dentistry courses, even though I never really used the things I had been taught there and then.

In 1997, my uncle told me about a dental practice that had come on sale near where he lived, which was located in a 1930s semi



detached house in Hanwell. There was little interest in the practice from anyone else and I ended up buying it. It was in quite a bad state. It was housed on the ground floor but the toilet didn't even contain a sink! The first thing we did was give the whole place a lick of paint. I had no idea about running a business but after six months I took on an associate. By 2000, the practice expanded further. With a team of nine including three associates, we provided dental services six days a week, two evenings a week and were booked four weeks in advance. Our main growth was through building a good reputation and word of mouth referrals.

It was a very busy time. I had a huge NHS contract of £300,000 and I then took the very difficult decision of not renewing my NHS contract. I sadly said goodbye to my two associates and became a single-handed practitioner again after eight years. It was quite a hard decision to make, as financially you then have no guaranteed income.

I enjoyed every aspect of general dentistry, but my passion was cosmetic dentistry and so I invested heavily in my own training to improve my skills. I interpreted the direction of changes in the NHS as unfavourable and something that I could no longer rely upon. Using this insight, I decided to undertake a transformational change to my practice environment and its services. Saying goodbye to a

The successful Sparkle team, from left to right: Hardip Dhillon, Mei Tang, Sunita Verma, Wing Tang and Kavita Verma

substantial contract value and my associates was one of the bravest decisions I have made to date.

You have to completely change the way you work. I had to grit my teeth and get on with it. So while we were making the change, we were still operating as normal. It was quite a challenge, operating a practice amidst all the dust, noise and building work going on.

My sister Kavita Verma, joined the practice in 2003 as practice manager and together we implemented Investors in People and BDA Good Practice, as a framework to develop strategies to improve the performance of the practice and the team.

The making of Sparkle

In 2007, we became Sparkle Dental Boutique. I have never taken on a marketing or PR person, but have had Kavita to carry out most of our marketing activities for us. With the new practice it was important to promote and establish the new brand both within the practice and externally. Kavita wrote and implemented a marketing strategy which included writing/organising all our adverts, advertorials, press releases, brochures, newsletters, direct mails and so on. Kavita set up our website and sourced all our website images, as an impor-



Top: Sparkle Dental's reception area, Bottom: Sunita meeting Prince Charles at the Asian Women of Achievement Awards earlier this year

tant communication and promotional tool to sell what we do.

The practice refurbishment, prominent signage and an inviting entrance has resulted in a 500% increase in new patients coming into the practice just by walking or driving by. We recently hired an orthodontist, Dr Sarbjit Singh Cholia, as we found there was quite a demand for orthodontic treatment. We don't really see children in the practice, but it may be something we do in the future. Our most popular treatment is tooth-whitening as it is pretty non-invasive.

I have trained in the use of Botox and fillers but have not incorporated it into my practice as yet. My first passion and expertise lies in dentistry and I do not want to dilute this. I feel treatments such as these are specialised and should be administered by an expert in

this field. Therefore, if I do incorporate this service into the practice in the future, I will bring on board a specialist so that we can work in tandem.

Sunita the person

Who has been Sunita's biggest influence? 'I have to say that it has to be Chris Orr. He has given so much to the profession and is a really genuine and warm person. He has also been a big contributor to the BACD. I also admire Elaine Halley, President of the BACD, as a woman. She has set her niche up in Scotland and has taught me the importance of customer care. American dentistry has also been a great influence. Courses on relationship building with patients by Bobbi Anthony and Bill Blatchford were also extremely useful for me.'

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'Professionally I have been really proud of my practice being recognised nationally, especially in the last three years. Winning awards is a real boost. I think the team you have makes such a difference. They need to be very keen and very efficient. Customers need human contact and be treated with respect and dignity. I know it is a cliché but treat others in the way you want to be treated. You need to be actively listening to your patient. Sometimes the best solution for you may not be the best solution for the patient.

I make sure that we have a team meeting every morning with all the staff. You also have to make sure your staff are well-trained in every aspect of customer care. Make a fuss of your patients and make sure you take care of them. Every patient is offered the use of our relaxation room ten minutes before treatment starts.

Biggest challenge? 'I think I missed the whole IT thing. I worked so long without computers and had to start evening courses seven years ago just to catch up! Before then I didn't even know about Word documents and Excel spreadsheets! Thankfully I have now caught up with the IT revolution. Another huge challenge was setting up a fully private practice in a traditionally NHS area. Getting the staff trained to the high level required to enable excellent customer care and keeping standards maintained in terms of being recognised for Investor In People standard and BDA Good Practice Scheme.

My biggest mistake? 'That's a hard one! I suppose in our profession, as you practice your craft, you do make mistakes and you learn from them. Therefore the next time you do better. It is all well and good learning the theory but you really need to get your hands wet and practice cosmetic dentistry. I had a good grounding working in NHS dentistry - it gives you a fantastic base. You learn the real nitty gritty aspects: crowns, veneers, ex-

People in focus



Above: Sunita with Cherie Blair and Right: With James Caan, entrepreneur and star of TV's *Dragon's Den*



tractions, fillings and surgical stuff. Another mistake I think I made in the past was not understanding my patient's expectations. But I have learnt from that. Communication is the key. You have to use diagnostic software, 3D simulation and make wax-up models so that they can really see what is happening.

Away from dentistry

I am lucky that I have Wednesday and Friday afternoons off so I can pursue my other interests. However, if there is pending work in the practice, such as devising a new marketing strategy or compiling a new brochure, I can sit down with Kavita and work on that.

In my spare time I love travelling, hiking and photography. In fact I have recently been on holiday to Crete which involved plenty of walking. I love the outdoors and nature. I am also a big fan of meditation and yoga. Relaxation is a must for people in our profession. I recently went on a yoga retreat in





Above: The practice surgery room and right: some of Sunita's smile makeovers



Before case 1



After case 1



Before case 2



After case 2

Bangalore and a chef's training course. I guess it must be because I love learning – it is the eternal student in me! Besides this I have also done a belly-dancing course.

Crowning glory

Sunita recently topped these huge wealth of achievements by winning Professional of the Year at the Asian Women of Achievement Awards (www.awaawards.com). She was presented with the award by Cherie Blair in the presence of Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall. She says: 'The Asian Women of Achievement awards have been honouring talent for a decade and to be selected as Professional of the Year 2009 amongst such amazing women, is unbelievable and a great honour. Being the 10th year of the awards, I had the opportunity of meeting Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall. I am so pleased to have put women in dentistry firmly on the map, a profession that I love and that has given me so much.'

'It feels really good to raise awareness of cosmetic dentistry to a wider audience, as dentistry has never been represented at this event. I hope it also inspires other women to enter into our wonderful profession. I even received a letter of congratulations from the London Mayor Boris Johnson which was a lovely surprise too!'

Success for Sparkle continues, although she is going to have to do without her sister



Before case 3



After case 3



Before case 4



After case 4

and manager, Kavita, for a few months. She will be going to Goa where she will be giving her support to the Children Walking Tall charity, dedicated to helping slum and street children in India. On Sunday 26th July 2009 the Sparkle team completed an 11 mile sponsored walk across the bridges of London in aid of the UK based charity Children Walking Tall (www.childrenwalkingtall.com). Children

Walking Tall is a charity dedicated to helping slum and street children in India.

As Sunita says 'it really feels good knowing that we all did something to help Children Walking Tall. Doing this walk has certainly inspired us to do something again...but next time we may try something a little more adventurous like abseiling or jumping out of a plane!'