

# HOW DO YOU MANAGE?

Sisters are doing it for themselves, as **Sunita and Kavita Verma** of Sparkle Dental Boutique told Moira Crawford



Sparkle Dental Boutique, in Hanwell, West London, is probably one of the prettiest dental practices you could find anywhere in the world. And the judges of the *Private Dentistry* 2007 awards thought so too, judging Sparkle the Most Attractive Practice, as well as the runner-up in the overall Practice of the Year award.

It's the realisation of the dream and sheer hard slog of dentist Sunita Verma, with her sister and boutique manager, Kavita – but while the attention to detail and the lovely touches throughout the practice are evidence of a woman's eye and great taste, the practice is organised down to the rolling of the towels so that it all looks effortless.

The full story of how Sparkle came into being is in the *Private Dentistry* March 2008 issue pp 40-49, but here Sunita (SV) and Kavita (KV) explain the minute planning and preparation that keep the patient experience 'sparkling'.

**PD: What was the thinking behind Sparkle?**

**SV:** I had been very happy being an associate, coming home at the end of the day and enjoying travel and holidays. My uncle, who lives opposite this practice, told me it was up for sale but very run down. I took it on, named it The Smile Centre, and built it up very rapidly to around 7,000 patients with a team of nine. We worked evenings and weekends. I became fully private and my associates treated patients on the NHS.

A holiday with my sister in Santorini gave me the idea for Sparkle: themes around value, quality, treats, precious jewels, luxury; all very chic and sophisticated, and it gave us a great marketing angle too. We decided to go the whole hog and transform the practice with a completely new brand. We wanted to build a new identity reflecting our experiences of wonderful places we had visited such as Le Manoir aux Quat'

'I used to find it frustrating when someone left the practice and took all their knowledge with them. To avoid having to start from the beginning, we needed to capture this information, which we have done in a manual. Instructions on ordering stock for example, and from whom – is listed so that anyone can order. Putting these systems in place has made a lot of things much simpler, saving time and duplication of effort. Even our cleaner has a detailed checklist! The team is proud of how the practice looks and we all take responsibility for it being meticulously clean.'

## **Kavita Verma**

Saisons, where not just the food but the whole experience was beautifully orchestrated and everyone knew their part in the dance. We took the plunge, changed the name, terminated our NHS contract and started from scratch with just ourselves and my nurse, Wing.

### **PD: How did you come to work together?**

**SV:** Kavita joined in 2003 from a background in industry. She'd always helped me out at The Smile Centre, as I previously had little knowledge about running a business. I had muddled along but Kavita introduced a business structure, working towards Investors in People and the BDA Good Practice Scheme. We hadn't had staff meetings before because I was so busy in surgery. When Kavita joined, we set business goals, aims and objectives and a vision for the practice. Now Kavita looks after the marketing and everything about running the practice, while I concentrate on the clinical side.

### **PD: How do your different backgrounds and abilities complement each other?**

**SV:** We are both perfectionists: I still love the clinical, technical and precision side of dentistry, while she's anal about paperwork, detail, IT and so on. It's a great partnership. Kavita never comes into the surgery – she hates the gore – except for a smile celebration when a patient has finished a long course of treatment. Kavita does all the communication with our patients, even long after they've finished the treatment, and she's my PA too. I don't need to think about the running of the practice – I just sign the cheques. We share a vision for the practice and are able to bounce ideas off one another. I trust her completely and she

does things without my needing to ask. For any dentist to have that weight taken off your shoulders is amazing. I am so lucky to have her – she can turn her hand to anything! **KV:** As a clinician, Sunita has her head down, busy with clinical work. For her to work at her best, everything has to be going smoothly around her and the team, and I take care of that.

### **PD: How do you plan your day?**

**SV:** The surgeries are set up in the evening, so that in the morning we can have a 'huddle' before we start work; running through yesterday's patient list and checking that everything has gone well, and if it could have been improved; whether we slipped up anywhere. If any lab work isn't back, it can be chased, and if anyone has anything to raise, this is the time. If there are bottlenecks in the schedule, we try to make sure that busy times are covered.

Everyone is accountable and knows their responsibilities. My nurse informs me of anything I need to know. Things like quality control: the candles, the towels in the bathroom, the extra pampering touches, are all checked every day and we are so used to doing this that it is almost automatic. After this meeting, which takes 10 to 15 minutes, I have a few minutes with Kavita to discuss any bigger issues.

If we plan properly, we have a good day and it comes across to patients that they are in safe hands.

### **PD: What is your attitude to patient care/service?**

**SV:** We talk about patient care every day and it has become part of who we are and 'our speak'. We genuinely care about our patients and want them to be happy. Our computers are networked so we can all access patient notes immediately. Using pre-rehearsed scripts, we gather information about our patients and I can therefore see beforehand what their concerns might be, why they have come and general background information in advance. It all makes for a better experience for patients. We don't get it right all the time, and that's why we ask for feedback.

I write personal thank you notes to my patients and we celebrate the end of a course of treatment with flowers, gifts and other treats. A referral gift scheme is also in place to reward patients who recommend us to their friends.

### **PD: How can staff progress in such a small organisation?**

**SV:** My treatment co-ordinator, Wing, was my nurse but she has had further training and developed her role within the practice. She has now introduced her sister, Mei, to the practice and she is training as a nurse. So we have a double

sister team – at Sparkle sisters really are doing it for themselves!

**KV:** Team motivation is an important part of every morning meeting. We give praise for things done well. The team give a lot of themselves to patients and they too have emotional needs. We appreciate this, so organise treats such as holiday money, driving lessons, spa treatments etc, so that they can be pampered too. It may just be little things, but we go the extra mile for the team, being interested in them as individuals. We want to help all the team on their journey while with us, recognising the importance of getting qualifications.

**PD: You pay minute attention to detail. Do patients really notice it?**

**SV:** Attention to detail must run throughout the practice and be consistent. All the written communication must be good: aftercare instructions, etc, and every point of interaction should spell quality and care for the patient. We do it daily as part of what we do – if a bit of litter blows into the garden, any one of the team will pick it up. Patients do appreciate it. They may not notice the colour of the cabinets but they do see the little caring things we do: the massage we offer, lip balm, handcream, etc, all the little pampering extra goodies that enhance their experience. And they love it!

**PD: How do you organise your systems?**

**KV:** The BDA Good Practice Scheme helped us to put practice management systems in place to meet regulations. Everything is colour coded in surgery: the nurses' operational manual shows photos of set-ups and what is needed in terms of instruments, materials etc, so that it is easy to train someone new. The stock cupboards are all in alphabetical order so that they are foolproof. I used to find it frustrating when someone left the practice and took all their knowledge with them. To avoid having to start from the beginning, we needed to capture this information, which we have done in a manual. Instructions on ordering stock for example, and from whom – is listed so that anyone can order. Putting these systems in place has made a lot of things much simpler, saving time and duplication of effort. Even our cleaner has a detailed checklist! The team is proud of how the practice looks and we all take responsibility for it being meticulously clean.

**PD: Your website is quite different from many other dental websites. How did you develop it?**

**KV:** I wanted our website to have a strong identity, reflecting our themes of luxury and elegance. I didn't want a bog standard dental website and so I wrote the text and researched the pictures myself. I found an amazing non-dental website designer, Shaz Memon from Digimax UK ([www.digimaxuk.com](http://www.digimaxuk.com)) who has been outstanding in making our ideas a reality. We've built on our website and now I write a weekly blog where we discuss issues that get talked about in the dental journals but are not necessarily apparent to patients. Our website also includes smile makeovers as well as personal stories and photos of ourselves.

**PD: What have been the hard decisions and what lessons have you learned?**

**SV:** It was a big step to say goodbye to a major NHS contract and a great risk. We have had to make a huge change to the level of service we now offer. Some of our NHS patients have gone to other NHS practices, but others have elected to stay with us. I can now say that we really can care for our patients, and are constantly working towards doing even better for them. The building works at the practice made for a very difficult year, described in our *How I did it*, and although I saved some money by managing the project myself, I would have rather not had it that way. But I did learn a great deal!

I've got no regrets. I didn't want to stay in the NHS with all the goals and quotas. Now I have full clinical freedom to do what I feel needs to be done, and we are building good relationships with people who care about their health and wellbeing – and cosmetic treatment if they wish. And the team are really happy.

**PD: What was your best decision?**

**SV:** Going for Sparkle has been a fantastic decision, because I can now really understand what patient care is all about and we can and do deliver at this level. I don't work Saturdays or evenings now. The practice is easy to manage and we have a highly responsive team. Everyone in the practice wants to be there and play their part.

**PD: You've won a lot of awards recently. Are you going to go on entering competitions?**

**SV:** Last year we entered the *Private Dentistry Awards* in three categories: most innovative (highly commended), most attractive (winner) and marketing (finalist) and were highly commended as Practice of the Year. We also won the best practice environment at the Dental Awards and best practice in London at the *Dentistry Awards*. We were amazed and thrilled to do so well and to win anything at all – it's a fantastic achievement and lovely for the team to be recognised, but we won't be entering awards forever. We want to tell our story this year and then we will have done it.

**PD: How would you like people to think of Sparkle Dental Boutique?**

**KV:** I'd like people to think of Sparkle as a professional organisation, well organised and managed by people who know what they are doing; a great team with a good work ethic. But also that as a team we have fun, enjoy what we do and are passionate about quality and patient care. It's a fun team, but there's no messing about when it comes to patients, clinical care and excellence in dentistry.

**PD: What would be your 'top tips' to someone planning to convert to private practice?**

**SV:**

- Do the right thing by your patients. Their needs may not be addressed by the NHS. We take the time with new patients to let them see we are on their side and doing things for their benefit. This builds trust and confidence and gives you

the opportunity to suggest treatment options.

- You can't mix NHS and really top class private dentistry in one building. You can't have two different visions and act differently towards people in terms of the level of care you offer. We went the whole hog in terms of changing the brand, the service element and a year and a half on, we have a unique selling point. Sparkle is different from other practices. You don't have to do all that we did, but you do have to do it wholeheartedly.
- Invest in technology to help in your diagnosis and your treatment planning. Train your team not only to use it but to explain its benefits to patients.
- In a cosmetic practice, good photography is key: before and after photos; create an album on your website, together with testimonials. Showcase your work. People can get a feel for what you can do for them. My photography has improved greatly and I am still learning.
- The difference in the standard of care has to be evident throughout the practice. Attention to detail shows, but it needn't always cost a lot.
- Make sure you have the right team. Your receptionist must be trained to answer questions and be able to encourage patients to come in, even if its just for a tour of the practice. Our motto is train, train and keep on training.

#### PD: What next for Sparkle Dental Boutique?

**SV:** We have been through a massive period of change and a steep learning curve to get Sparkle up and running, and I now want to pause and enjoy what I'm doing. I'm working towards my BACD accreditation; have been on an occlusion course recently; need to fulfil both my clinical commitments as a single-handed practitioner and my CPD. We're looking forward to a period of consolidation and enjoying our time outside the practice. Kavita has just become a BDA Good Practice regional adviser and will be visiting other practices to help achieve this standard. She is also liaising with a local pharmaceutical company to provide dentistry for their employees and if that takes off I'll need to take on another dentist. We may get another specialist for implants. It's lovely to work in what is your own creation every day, and create lovely smiles, but I'm looking forward to getting a bit more of a work-life balance! **PD**

### Fact File

**Practice:** Sparkle Dental Boutique, Hanwell, London

**Website:** sparkledental.co.uk

**Principal:** Sunita Verma, qualified Guy's 1990

**Boutique manager:** Kavita Verma, also a BDA Good Practice regional consultant

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