

Dental hygienist

trailblazer

BDJ Team editor Kate Quinlan interviews dental hygienist **Jo Kennedy**, 38, also known as The Sparkle Fairy. Jo has taken advantage of the recent change in rules over direct access to patients and launched her own mobile dental hygiene service.

Can you tell me a bit about your background?

I was born and raised in Bermondsey in Central London but now live in Surrey. I have been married for almost seven years and have a three-year-old daughter. We recently moved to Surrey as we wanted a life where we could just go out and have more freedom, trees and green space. When I go back into London - as my parents still live in Bermondsey - the thing that really gets me is how close all the buildings are. They're building flats on top of flats; when you look out your window you're looking into someone else's window. For the first time in my life, I now have a lovely garden, as previously I've always lived in a flat, so we're making the most of it.

Did you always want to work in dentistry?

When I was at school I wanted to be a primary school teacher or go into advertising so I did my A-levels to go in that direction. The first thing I realised was that I couldn't spell very well so becoming a primary school teacher wasn't really the best option. Unfortunately I was a child of the 80s and dyslexia wasn't really spoken about. Once when I was about 11, in history class, I remember writing down the name of a country and my teacher said to me, Jo is that really how you think you spell that word, and I said

The Sparkle Fairy

The Sparkle Fairy is a mobile dental hygienist business created by Jo Kennedy Dip Dh RCS (ENG). Jo offers oral hygiene services at people's homes or offices, for care home residents and for children, in London, Surrey and parts of the surrounding counties. They are divided into three appointment types: gum therapy, extensive gum therapy or periodontal therapy. www.thesparklefairry.co.uk

yes. But she just walked away and nothing was ever picked up. I remember all my tests always had big red lines across them and the words 'spellings, spellings' but nothing was ever picked up or investigated. So I really liked the idea of working in an office, or going into media, then I did some work experience on a magazine but hated every second of it. I came out of there and thought, 'What on earth am I going to do with my life?'

How did you get into dental nursing?

I did dental nursing as work experience as a teenager. I was terrified, really nervous, but absolutely loved it. I decided to give dental nursing a go while I thought about what I wanted to do next. I went back to the practice where I had done my work experience and they said if you want to do dental nursing, you need to do it correctly, go and train in a hospital. I was very lucky and got on the dental nursing course at Guy's and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Did you go straight into dental hygiene after that?

I loved being in the dental environment, but I also knew from a very early stage in my dental nursing course that I wanted more. I didn't want to work with someone else's patients, I wanted my own patients that believed and trusted in the quality of care that I would provide. And then I got talking to some of the hygienists and I thought yes, this is it, hygiene is what I want to do. For some reason at 19 I thought I was too old to be going to university and I didn't want to do five years to become a dentist. I thought academically I would be fine but had always struggled with my spelling so had no confidence. Looking back I probably could have coped with it, but for me hygiene was a better fit. I love perio and loved it even when I was nursing. I was very lucky. I called the Eastman and went for the interview and remember being with some very intelligent people and thinking I'm never going to get this, but I got a place and the rest is history. You can be the brightest person in the world but you have to be good with people. I am a talker, I love talking and engaging with people and I think I'm quite good at recognising people's personalities. I think as a hygienist - as any clinician - that's a major part of your job. Before the patient even sits in my chair, I need to work out what my patient is all about because that affects how you pitch your delivery of care to that person. I love my job and I love it even more now than when I first qualified.

Does anyone else in your family work in dentistry?

No. I'm the first person in my immediate family to go into further education. I had a lot of

support from my parents who steered me in the right direction and encouraged me to follow my dreams.

Where you have worked since becoming a dental hygienist?

Where haven't I worked? Hospital, private practice, for BUPA in the corporate environment, and for a dental management company where we went in and helped practices boost their productivity and income. When I first came into the hygiene world I did a lot of locum but found it a bit demoralising. I have an ethos that I want to treat patients the way I like to be treated and going in to locum I wasn't doing that, it was a conveyor belt, scale polish scale polish. It wasn't me. Then I went to work in Chelsea and my boss there was great, he said 'Work how you want to work, if you want to do plaque and bleeding charts for every patient I trust you, if that's what you want to do.' It was amazing that he believed in my skills as a hygienist and knew that I was giving the patients the best possible care and it completely reignited my faith in dentistry. I am on a forum on Facebook and I see what other hygienists write on there and I think it's sad that some of them are turning away from hygiene, going back to nursing or changing careers completely because they're stuck in practices that want you in surgery for 20 minute appointments, scale polish scale polish. That's not a job in my eyes. It must be so testing and stressful when you can't give the care you want to give to your patients because you're rushing patients in and out of the surgery. That's not the dentistry that I want to give to my patients. At The Sparkle Fairy of course we definitely don't do that. We often go over our scheduled appointments at no extra cost if we feel the patient needs that extra care and reassurance, even travelling to appointments way out of our catchment area for those that desperately need access to primary dental care.

Did direct access inspire your decision to start your own business?

I've always wanted to do this. Fourteen years ago I knew of nail technicians and beauticians who went into people's homes and carried out different services and I felt like there must be a place for mobile dental hygiene. Not every patient can get to a dental surgery so there must be a whole raft of patients walking around dentally unfit because no one is getting to them. I spoke to my husband Andrew about it and he thought it was a great idea but he couldn't see how it would work having looked at the legalities behind it. Then when it was announced that the rules around direct access had been changed in 2013, I said to Andrew, 'This is it, this is what

I've been waiting for'. I'd just come back from maternity leave and my boss announced he was retiring, which broke my heart, and I felt like if we were ever going to do it, it would be now. We had some savings and we thought right, shall we buy a house or should we put it into a business. Hence, we're still renting!

Has it been very difficult to set up The Sparkle Fairy?

Yes, it has taken two years to get The Sparkle Fairy up and running, almost one of those years spent getting CQC clearance. It's not a quick process and there is an immense amount of work involved in setting up a dental practice.

A hygienist wrote to me a while back asking me to detail how I set the service up. I didn't respond because we run our business in a way that suits us and I can't tell someone how to start their own company, they need to work that out for themselves by studying what is involved in opening a practice and learning top to bottom how to manage and run a practice, but they also have to realise that's it's not just about picking up the scalers and going to somebody's house. To care for your patients and give them the care they deserve you need to make sure that every 't' is crossed and every 'i' is dotted because that is what they deserve, and the CQC require it. So the best thing to do is heavily research. One

deliver a service to patients that is safe, effective, caring, responsive to patient needs and well-led so we have invested in everything we need to make our service the best it can be.

How did you come up with the name?

Andrew wasn't keen on the name The Sparkle Fairy! But if you look at a lot of dental practice names they can put off patients. I wanted something a bit more approachable and light-hearted, as the dental practice is not portrayed as the most fun place to go. We just sat down and went through a lot of different names and ideas and after much deliberation The Sparkle Fairy was born.

Did you make the website?

I have to give a lot of credit to my husband. He is brilliant with computers and he created the website. He had the idea for the fairy logo on the website which we had made externally. Running the website is a job in itself and on top of that there is our social media presence. We don't have a traditional practice that patients walk past in the street so marketing online is really important and we try to look at new and exciting ways to raise awareness of our brand.

Did you leave your day job to start the business?

No, I still work in practice part-time. I have always been very open with my boss about what I'm doing; he teases me about it and says 'can you get your van out and we'll all jump in' but he knows exactly what I'm doing and he's happy about it. Caterham Dental Care is a lovely practice that really cares about its patients and I really enjoy working there and the people I work with.

I saw on your website that you offer a variety of services and packages. Have you added to these over time?

I have always wanted to make sure that we had, for a patient without any dental health issues, a 30 minute appointment, a longer appointment for those who need it and an hour appointment for those with periodontal disease for root planing. We have other services as well such as retirement home visits, bridal party visits etc and these have proven to be popular.

Can you outline a typical week?

Every week is different and busy, particularly since the ES article. It's good to be the trailblazer but the problem we have is no-one is looking for us at the moment, as we are the first private mobile hygienist service, so we are just getting our name out there and letting people know that this service exists and can help an immense



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Andrew spent months and months researching what we needed to buy and then once we got through all of that we went into the brainstorming phase, lots of trying to work out the logistics of how are we going to do this, how are we going to provide this service in a mobile surgery and it took a very, very long time.

Trying to work out how to condense a hygiene surgery into a van and decide what to take with me was really difficult. You really have to work it out for yourself and even if I look at what I'm doing now compared to six months ago, I do things differently. I'm a lot more streamlined and a lot more compact because I know what I need for each appointment and how to get it all back in the van in the quickest way possible to move onto the next appointment.

of the best ways is to use the CQC's key lines of enquiry which shows you what your practice must provide to patients.

We ask a lot of our patients because we are asking them to trust us. A lot of patients contact us by email and that's the only contact we have with them before we turn up at their door, so it's really important for patients to be able to visit our website and see that we have CQC clearance, that I am registered with the GDC and they can see reviews from other patients to see the standard of service we provide. Having an article in the *Evening Standard Magazine* earlier this year was excellent because it gave people confidence to contact us, to see that this service exists and that it is authorised and regulated by the CQC. Our whole job is to

amount of people. We do have a few patients who have googled 'mobile dental hygienist' and found us and I always find those people fascinating. We do anything from 6.30/7 am appointments right through to 9 pm. It's a new business so we have chosen to do those hours, get ourselves out there and provide the service for our patients at times that suit them. I think I was a bit naïve at first. I didn't realise that starting my own business would be this hard, this time consuming, but I don't resent it, it's an amazing journey and every day we are helping to open up primary care dental services to those that need them the most.

Thursday mornings I dedicate to my daughter so we've had swimming and gymnastics this morning, had lunch then we'll drop her off to her grandma after this interview, then we have three appointments tonight. When it's your own business it's very difficult to have a cut-off point and not reply to patients and enquiries, whatever day or time. I have been known to be texting patients back at 10 pm on a Sunday night who are a bit anxious about their Monday morning appointment but I can't ignore them; I reply and put their mind at rest.

I see that you also offer tooth whitening on your website.

Is it popular?

Tooth whitening is offered but is not that popular at the moment. I'm not much of a saleswoman to be honest. The reason we want to offer tooth whitening is because illegal tooth whitening really concerns me. It concerns me that people are going out there to use damaging products to whiten people's teeth, performing an act of dentistry when they are not qualified to do so. So I wanted to offer a safe, legal tooth whitening service that is done in the home.

It's difficult because when you talk to people, they've heard about beauticians doing it for £50 and you're telling them it costs much more. When I've cleaned someone's teeth and they say they're interested in tooth whitening I say 'live with the teeth for a while now that I've cleaned them, and see how you feel'. I never want to bombard my patients with buy this, do this, but if they do want whitening they can request it and I will provide it if appropriate with the help of our dentist who applies the first application.

Do you sometimes have to advise patients to see a dentist?

Yes. For example recently I saw a young man of 29 who had never had anyone look in his mouth - I'll leave that to your imagination - and he had a lot of demineralisation going on in his mouth. So when I had finished with him I asked him to book in with a dentist and told him why he needed to see a dentist. Also, with a

patient's permission, if necessary I write to their dentist to outline my findings. All of my patients receive a letter after I have seen them that outlines what I have done, what I have suggested that they need to do and when I need to see them again along with plaque and bleeding scores and/or a six point pocket chart so the patient can keep up with their care.

Continuation of care is really important. I'm not taking patients away from dentists but I'm seeing patients who otherwise wouldn't see anyone and in turn encouraging/recommending that they do see a dentist, not just for the health of their teeth but for the health of their mouth, oral cancer screening and so on.

How did you get the word out about The Sparkle Fairy when you first launched?

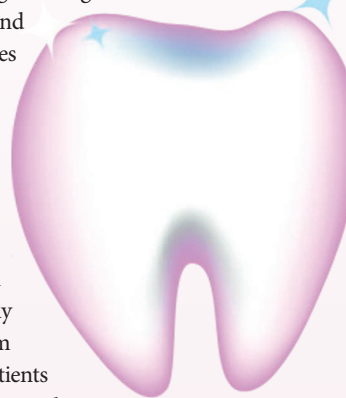
When we first launched I used Facebook, loads of posts on our own profiles, then on local parent and other pages to get the word out there. We had CQC clearance in October and had a handful of patients shortly after that, mainly referred by friends. Then in January we really started marketing and using Google ads and many other marketing methods to get the business out there and things have really picked up.

Is it sometimes difficult to cope with demand?

It's starting to get that way as we don't really want to do weekends when we offer such long hours in the week. But I do book patients in for a Saturday morning if it's urgent and they can't do any other day. We try to accommodate everyone who wants an appointment and can usually deliver within a few weeks of contact, which is pretty good for dental hygiene appointments generally.

How does your husband find the time to travel around in The Sparkle Fairy van with you?

As a firefighter he does shift work so we work around when he's not doing a shift. I have to have someone with me who is trained in certain areas. I'm just lucky that I married a man that already has CRB checks and he is a trained first aider and he's on site as my chaperone.



Do you enjoy being on the road every day and meeting lots of different people?

I love it. It's so

intimate: how you get to know your patient in a normal surgery is nothing like how I get to know my patients. I get to meet my patient's family, their pets, see which toys their children play with, what pictures they have in their front room. A lot of trust is involved as I'm going into their home and seeing personal things. They get my full attention so I have the time to chat if they want to and I'm not thinking about getting the next patient through the door as you might be in a practice.

I make the effort to eat healthily and take a packed lunch when I'm on the road as I can't live off fast food. If we're out in the evening I make sure we take food for the whole day prepared at home.

Do you have plans to expand in the future?

The dream long term is to expand and have a fleet of hygienists all over the country which will open up primary dental care to so many people who are currently unable to access it due to varying reasons, eg disabilities, time constraints, etc.

Would you encourage other DCPs to consider launching their own business?

Yes 100% I would. There are a lot of very driven, very caring and enthusiastic hygienists out there and it's hard to have the bravery to say 'actually, I can start my own practice', so it would be great for other hygienists to do it. Setting up my own business has been very challenging and time consuming but it is extremely rewarding in the sense that I have my own patient base that trust and believe in me to better their oral health. I'm looking forward to seeing what the future holds for The Sparkle Fairy and will continue to strive to open up our service to those that need it the most.

bdjteam2016143