



The dental nurse with a fire in her belly

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Polly Bhambra is a dental nurse, trainer, examiner, practice owner and philanthropist who has won accreditation to run a training academy. She tells **Caroline Holland** why it means so much.

Polly Bhambra has certainly broken the glass ceiling during her dental career of more than 30 years. She was the first dental nurse to have an NHS dental contract and probably the first to own a dental practice as well as co-own a group of practices.

Predictably, Polly has encountered prejudice and scepticism along the way, both as a woman and a person of colour, but principally as a dental nurse. Most haunting were the words of one dentist who said disparagingly: 'You are not a dentist, what do you know?'

She has proved the sceptics wrong, she says, thanks to inspirational people who championed her and gave her the freedom to develop into the dental leader that she is today.

Her career began at the age of 16 when she left school to train at Birmingham Dental

Hospital. This was one of the best decisions of her career, she says, since Birmingham has been at the forefront of building understanding of the link between oral health and systemic health. Already ambitious, she gained every possible nursing qualification while she had the opportunity. Returning to her hometown of Preston, she worked for several years in both orthodontic and general practices. She recalls the day the dentist she was nursing for put a barbed broach beneath her nose so she could experience the smell sensation of a necrotic pulp. This assault on her senses was a valuable turning point. There had to be more to life, she thought! She sensed a fire in her belly driving her to new experiences.

Her marriage took her back to the West Midlands and the opportunity to work for a company training dental nurses. At the same time, she was approved as an examiner for the National Examining Board for Dental

Nurses (NEBDN) and applied to be a sales representative for Oral-B, subsequently amalgamated into Procter and Gamble. This was the opportunity to stop working in practice and gain industry experience.

Once on the ground promoting power toothbrushes, Polly realised that if dentists and hygienists could try using one while they were in training, they would be converted for life. She put herself forward to visit dental schools and give talks to dentist, dental therapy and dental hygiene students. Birmingham Dental Hospital immediately welcomed her back and other dental schools followed suit. 'My manager saw something in me and invited me to come up with a business plan and a budget,' says Polly.

She was empowered to devise a training course to deliver to first year 'freshers' and final-year undergrads who would be given a free Oral-B power toothbrush. Her area was the North of England and Scotland whilst



the hygienist Christina Chatfield was her counterpart in the South. Procter and Gamble made her responsible for rolling out an oral care programme in dental schools across Western Europe.

By now Polly had two daughters and was pregnant with her third child and she and her husband Amar started looking around for a bigger house. At least, that was the plan until an estate agent mentioned that he would be meeting some people at commercial premises later that day; a derelict former doctor's surgery had just gone on the market. Polly decided to tag along and view the surgery for herself.

'I walked in and I could picture the building laid out as a dental surgery, the decon room here, surgery there, reception at the front. I knew I could make it work.'

So, the Bhambra family abandoned their plans for moving home and bought the surgery instead, converting it into a private dental practice. The decision paid off but ultimately, it was too challenging to carry on her day job with P&G and run a practice at the same time. She now retains ownership of the building which she leases out as a dental practice.

The next turning point was in 2010 when she went to a dentistry event. She bumped into a dentist she knew. He told her he was about to sell his dental practice in Wolverhampton.

Later that day they met up and Polly made an offer. Within three months she was the owner of Treetops Dental Surgery, a five-surgery practice with a small NHS contract and an extensive Denplan list. The fact that the NHS contract had her name on it was not a problem to the Primary Care Trust but some dentists expressed their disapproval. The early months were challenging as she extended the building into a nine-surgery practice, went paperless and worked hard to build the trust of her staff.

Treetops Dental Surgery has flourished and enabled Polly to focus on being a practice owner, trainer and examiner. She has



Left to right Polly with the current full-time clinicians at Treetops: Amit Pankania, Peter Reece, Amandeep Bhambra, Vis Pather and practice manager Louise White

'Nowadays, instead of disapproval, dentists express their gratitude that Polly is so efficient at running their practice, enabling them to do what they love, which is the dentistry.'

continued to invest and now co-owns seven more practices in the West Midlands, working with a dentist and a barrister. Together they have formed Tri-dental. Dentist Jas Jandu is the lead clinician, while a barrister colleague Guloo Virdee oversees all the contract work and Polly heads up on staffing and administration. Altogether they employ more than 180 people.

Treetops is part of the group but solely hers and she is already onto the next extension, planning a new basement and first floor development to gain more surgeries and space

for staff as well as a Board Room for her new training academy.

It was when she was on her way to IDS just a few weeks ago that Polly had final confirmation that she was accredited to run a training academy at Treetops. She had begun the project in 2021 when her mother died suddenly. She felt broken and lost her ability to move forward with any significant changes.

In time however, Polly reminded herself that her mother would want her to be progressing and so she went back to the paperwork and resubmitted it to NEBDN.



Polly with Dr David Holden and Dr Richard Glover, the original owners of Treetops, established in 1970

‘Her mantra is that dental practices must always put patients first and everyone needs to unite around that ethos.’

Getting accreditation was a wonderful moment for Polly who felt her mother at her side.

Nowadays, instead of disapproval, dentists express their gratitude that Polly is so efficient at running their practice, enabling them to do what they love, which is the dentistry.

What has been the secret of her success? Most importantly, having the right people around her, chief amongst them her IT Consultant husband who, fortunately for the family, works from home. Her mantra is that dental practices must always put patients first and everyone needs to unite around that ethos. She strongly believes that while a practice needs leadership, it does not need a hierarchy. Everyone in the practice has a role and plays an essential part. She is very strict about culture. She won't tolerate anyone talking about colleagues behind their backs. She invests in her staff and they reward her with their loyalty.

Just recently, she was carrying out an appraisal on a young dental nurse and asked her what her ambition was. The trainee replied that she wanted to be sitting where Polly was.

‘I was delighted. I got up and hugged her. I told her that I wanted her to feel empowered to work towards this goal.’

Polly is driven to give back, both in her community and in the dental profession. She does not charge NEBDN for her work as an examiner and she delivers ongoing support to several charities. She is also a founder member of a new Women in Dentistry group.

‘At times I suffer from imposter syndrome, a sense of disbelief that I have got this far. It's not always easy. It's been about timing, having the right people around me and having a process.’

What, I wondered, did she say to the dentist who told her: You are not a dentist, what do you know? ‘I said, I know that if a patient has a BPE score of 4, it's wrong not to do anything.’

A reply which communicated that to be a dental practice owner, what matters above all is an ethical approach to life and dentistry.

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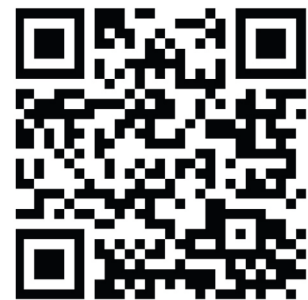
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