

'I had to give it my **ALL**'



Debbie Hill is Managing Director of Cardiff-based Tooth Fairies Dental Agency. Here she talks to *Vital* about her background and how she came to launch a successful company in a recession.

In February 1987 I was visiting Rumney Hill Dental Practice in Cardiff for a routine examination and my practitioner, who was the principal, asked me whether I would be interested in working as a dental nurse. He said he would help to train me in the position. I started the following day and never looked back, working full time at chairside and rotating between surgeries each week.

This was a busy NHS practice providing a full variety of treatments to over 20,000 patients so life was never dull!

The principal had the patience of a saint and taught me the ropes. The scope to be able to communicate with patients whilst caring and making a difference to their dental experience really appealed to me. In addition, working as part of a multidisciplinary team was very motivating and always allowed for variation in my role.

In my first dental nurse position, which spanned almost 11 years, the continuity of seeing patients recurrently was a massive reward, getting to know generations of families and sharing a small part of their life.

Like dentistry, the role of the dental nurse has always kept evolving, so there has never come a time in my career that I have considered moving to another industry. I feel very honoured to have found the right career!

It was many years after starting in the role and starting a family that I formalised my training, doing the NEBDN dental nurse course in Cardiff, part-time in the evening over two years. I passed the exam first time. By this time I was married with two young children and the learning was stimulating and a



The Tooth Fairies team (l-r): Bethan Powell (Tutor), Helen Criddle (Tutor), Debbie Hill (MD/Course Director), Lauren Hill (Recruitment Manager) and Lucy Salter (Training and Programme Development Manager/Tutor)

welcome break from the kids' bedtime routine! I thoroughly enjoyed the challenges of learning and managing the time for study, work and running a home.

At a certain point I realised that I wanted more and started to consider other roles. Eventually I moved into a specialist dental nursing position for two years in an exclusive referral-only endodontic practice in Cardiff. This position was rewarding as regards the learning and development and caring for patients during complex procedures, but after two years I realised I needed more in terms of patient interaction and stimulation. It was also the right time for me in regard to my family responsibilities to take my first management position.

The jump from clinical to non-clinical management position was exciting and exhilarating in lots of ways. I had at this point had the privilege to work with two excellent practices. In hindsight I realise what a vital part they played in moulding me to hold the opinions and professional ethics I do to this day. I will be eternally grateful to Dr Paul Bartley and Dr Duncan Shadwell for this influence on my career.

My first practice management position was within a dental body corporate. I understand now on reflection that I made an impact on that company at that time as I came to the position with a very clear understanding of what makes a good practice successful. I swiftly applied this understanding to the practice I was managing.

After one year the practice's turnover had increased by 104% and the team we had formed was dynamic by any standard.

The ideas and management style I had developed was appreciated and so multi-site management followed on after less than two years in the company. The owner of the company trusted my competence in the



courses and making sure I kept all my dental knowledge and experience up-to-date.

I realised the motivation that individuals can achieve from learning and swiftly enrolled all of the managers in the company in the region on to management development programmes to enhance their skills.

I thoroughly enjoyed the recruitment role as it was a big change to operational management. It helped me to gain time management skills and various organisational skills including business writing and the role included travel to European destinations and liaising with lots of dental professionals – which I absolutely love!

a fantastic experience as it brought practice managers together in workshops to develop new skills and enabled me to guide them through the programme and developing their own teams to meet the criteria and standards for BDA accreditation. I felt a great sense of achievement, as did the practices, when the accreditations were attained.

After two years in this role and lots of travelling across the beautiful Welsh countryside, I decided to leave the corporate environment and set up Tooth Fairies Dental Agency Limited. I took the next few months to plan and develop my ideas into a working reality. During this time I worked as part of the BDA Good Practice team as an assessor and consultant working between the London and Cardiff offices. I worked with an exceptional team but sadly, if Tooth Fairies was to be a success, I realised I had to give it my all.

I formed Tooth Fairies as a limited company in 2009. Being able to set up a business in Wales at the height of a recession without any borrowing is really a credit to me and my wonderfully encouraging husband Alan (he is my rock and my biggest fan!). He has given me unflinching support and reassurance every step of the way.

Tooth Fairies now provides training, practice management consultancy and recruitment services to over 300 practices in South Wales and the South West of England.

Tooth Fairies has been growing and developing and going from strength to strength ever since it was just an idea for starting a company. I plan for Tooth Fairies to continue to prosper as an agency and ever increase the amount of practices that we help with short and long term cover, as well as permanent recruitment.

In addition, now we are accredited we offer both City and Guilds *and* the NEBDN dental nurse training courses. We will continue to add to the courses offered by developing and successfully delivering all post-qualification certificates, as well as reception, practice manager and practice coordinator courses. Our first NEBDN oral health education course is scheduled to start this March.

In an average week in Cardiff at Tooth Fairies I work at the office during the day and often evenings and weekends if I am teaching or coordinating the training groups. My time is very carefully managed across the year with time allocated for meetings and travel, as is relaxation and family time!

I interview every single person who applies



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role and allowed me to grow and realise my business potential, always supporting me with ideas but giving me enough autonomy so that I could take ownership of ideas and theories and make them work. This was always in benefit to patients and maintaining excellent standards.

My own entrepreneurial skills were uncovered while working at the dental body corporate as it was very much the culture when I joined. The move to becoming a business development manager and later to GDP Recruitment Manager for this corporate allowed me the chance to reflect on my skills and develop a definite developmental plan for three years. This started with management

In 2007 I was head-hunted to a senior operational role in a much smaller corporate body whose practices were mainly situated in Wales. This role took me back to operational management in very rudimentary terms. The practices were set up from scratch in lots of instances and so building teams, supporting them and helping them to understand patient care was high priority. In this role I was able to use my skills widely in areas that I feel very passionately about; one of these is quality assurance.

I embarked upon taking all 13 practices through the British Dental Association Good Practice Scheme simultaneously. This was

to work at the agency personally so that I can maintain the standard of dental professionals being offered to practices as temporary or permanent staff.

My role is so varied that it is never 9-5 office based. I visit practices on consultancy visits and also keep up-to-date with staff during the week and organise and attend regular update meetings with key clients as well staff.

The team of people at Tooth Fairies is outstanding with a great mixture of skills.

Lucy heads up the training and development; we have a fantastic tutor team with Helen and Bethan bringing their individual styles and input to the courses; we have help from Wendy and Jenny with moderation and standardisation from Lucy, Megan, Lisa, Wendy and me.

Lauren manages the agency day to day and has a fantastic amount of patience and professionalism, taking care of the nursing team and practice liaison. They are all helped along by Christina in the accounts department and me, giving overall direction and encouragement. In short, none of it is possible without team spirit and all working to the same clearly defined goals.

In the past two years, for the first time, I have felt that I now have the time to become involved in other dentally-associated interests. I give my time to the British Association of Dental Nurses (BADN) Health and Safety committee and the NEBDN Quality Assurance committees in a part-time capacity. Becoming a part-time examiner for the NEBDN National Diploma is an exciting and welcome role; the actual examining and update training only require a few days' commitment a year.

I was also appointed to the General Dental Council (GDC) Fitness to Practise panel last year and commit a certain amount of time to this role also.

I appointed my husband as our 'Leisure & Pleasure Manager' when I set up Tooth Fairies and so he enjoys organising our holidays and social calendar. This includes meeting friends and family, dancing and romancing and everything in between!

Alan thoroughly enjoys this role as it is the only time he can ever boss me around and get away with it and I usually love the outcome so he gets 10/10 every time!

I love to spend spare time at the weekends with family and friends and taking long walks with my three 'new babies': Henry, a 2-year-old working cocker spaniel; Daniel, a 2-year-old English Springer spaniel; and Frankie, a 4-year-old black Labrador. My three children are

grown up now and I have a grandson called Max. My eldest daughter Lauren has followed me into dentistry, starting as a receptionist and working up into a management position. She is currently



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Recruitment Manager at Tooth Fairies, managing and supporting the dental nurse team and their performance at practices.

I perform best while working under pressure.

I would like to continue to develop and learn so that I can always improve and deliver excellence within Tooth Fairies and in dentistry to always be the best that I can be, whilst leading others to help them realise their true potential and allow them to develop in their chosen areas.

I would encourage dental nurses thinking of progressing in their careers to give it their all. There are many positions that dental care professionals (DCPs) can apply for and be appointed to where their opinion and contribution can make a real difference. This is an achievement for us all to have a voice that can be heard and considered in a professional capacity.

For dental nurses wanting to start their own business: research their market, always do things the right way, study if necessary to gain additional skills, plan and as long as they have the business acumen and are commercially aware, they should be able to succeed.

If I could go back and speak to my 16-year-old self, I would tell her to try not to do anything that she will regret in time. Boys are really not that interesting: do not let them get in the way of university and your learning potential! On a more serious note I do not regret learning in a vocational route as it has enabled me to really become a specialist in my area and I am able to reflect and develop skills that are relevant to my career along the way.

I believe that the future is bright for dentistry in the UK. I have found it an

exhilarating industry to work in for the past 25 years and expect the clinical developments to continue so that we can always deliver the best to patients.

Interview by Kate Maynard

Thank you to Tooth Fairies for sending the lovely photos shown throughout this article.

TOOTH FAIRIES

Tooth Fairies is currently working towards Investors in People. Debbie has recently been awarded the Fellowship from the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) for her contribution to senior management in dentistry. This most prestigious membership grade is reserved for those who have at least seven years' management experience including five years as a senior manager and a qualification at degree level (level 5).

Tooth Fairies is based in Cardiff and has offices with training rooms in Rumney. It offers dental professionals including nurses, receptionists, therapists and dentists on a temporary and permanent basis to practices in Wales and the South West of England. It also supplies several specialist contracts to prisons.

Tooth Fairies is an accredited training centre for NEBDN and City and Guilds.

Keep up-to-date with Tooth Fairies by registering an interest on the website at www.toothfairiesdentalagency.co.uk.