“I was **hooked** on *turning an idea* into **reality**?”

Dental practice manager, consultant, tutor, gardener ... and prolific Twitter tweeter **Sylvie Sturrock** relates her impressive journey through dentistry and shares her secrets for a fulfilling career and management success.

Climbing the career ladder

In 1983 I was working part-time, filing at an orthodontic practice in Margate when I saw an advert in the local paper. BRAND NEW DENTAL PRACTICE OPENING IN MAY, it said. It sounded so glamorous and exciting and a new building had been built to accommodate this huge dental clinic, so I decided to apply and was invited to interview.

They were looking for 20 people to work in a 12-chair clinic and hundreds of people attended the interview. We were all told to come at 10am and initially asked a few questions to see if we could stay to be interviewed by the principals. I passed that bit and was told to take a seat and wait to be called for my interview. I waited two and a half hours and was just considering leaving when they called my name.

My interviewers painted a great picture of a brand new, state of the art dental practice offering the most extraordinary dentistry in the UK and said that they were going to build the number one dental team along the way. I wanted so much to be a part of that.

The new practice was called Mill Lane Dental Practice. I worked there for 13 years, starting out as a trainee dental nurse and leaving as Head of Mill Lane Training Academy.

Mill Lane Dental Practice started life as a busy NHS practice, and I mean busy. We were open 7am to 7pm, five days a week, and the clinical rooms saw over 30 patients a day. As a dental nurse you worked either 7am to 1pm or 2pm to 7pm and each room had a dedicated dentist who did the whole 12 hour shift.

The reception desk had four receptionists at all times to deal with the colossal footfall and incoming calls. By the time I left there were about 50,000 registered patients.

I acquired six years' experience as a trainee dental nurse before I attempted my National

Certificate. I couldn't take the exam before then as the entry requirements were A-levels in biology and English; I had the English but not the biology. But then my prayers were answered – as there was a national shortage of candidates for the National Certificate for dental nurses, the A-levels for entry were dropped. I signed up at my local college straight away. Signing up was easy; the difficult bit was getting to the college as it was 43 miles away in Chatham.

I was allowed to leave the practice two hours early every Wednesday to get to Chatham for 6.30pm. As I didn't drive my boyfriend Trevor would pick me up, drive me to college and sit and wait in the car park while I was at my lesson. We would reach home around 11pm and the next day I would be on duty at 7am.

I was dumbstruck when I took my exam a year later and failed! This had never been a consideration as I was a brilliant nurse who studied so hard and knew all there was to know. I was really knocked back but took the

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decision to go back to college for a whole year more of study. I didn't think just doing a resit would be enough.

The following May I passed the exam with flying colours and was promoted.

Over the next four years I was part of the Specialist Nursing Team for the Periodontal Department, the Implant Department and the Orthodontic Department.

I then went on to take my Oral Health Education certificate in Canterbury – my favourite course of all. Once I had completed this I was asked to start up a Preventative Dental Unit (PDU) at Mill Lane, also known as a kids' club. So practice manager Nicci and I set up The Tough Tooth Club.

The Tough Tooth Club was a huge success and gave me my first taste of starting a business. I was hooked on turning an idea into reality and reaping the rewards that go along with doing something well – not just the financial rewards but the feeling of creating something and it works.

My next goal was to become a teacher. As a child I had longed to be a teacher and had converted my garage at home into a classroom in the summer holidays to 'teach' kids from my street. Once while dental nursing, a patient of mine who happened to be a college lecturer had just finished a long course of treatment that included multiple bridges and crowns being fitted. At his last appointment it was my task to show him how to floss and brush his new mouth. As I finished showing him he turned round to me and said 'Do you know Sylvie, you'd make a really great teacher.'

I discussed it with my principal and the practice agreed to fund me; I just had to do all the hard work. I was asked to put a proposal together of how it would benefit the business and that's how the idea for the Mill Lane Institute was born – 12 months later it was a self-funding reality.

I had to practise teaching as part of my five year course to gain a teaching certificate, so we started a National Certificate for Dental Nurses course. The course proved so popular that we had a waiting list of candidates. The nearest dental nurse school was 43 miles away so we filled a huge gap in the market.

I was born to be a teacher. I cannot explain the extraordinary feeling of working with a person who wants to be a dental nurse and with your help they achieve that. They get their certificate and you know then that they can achieve whatever they want to. I felt the same back in 1990 when I received my letter telling me I had passed; I was so elated and that's why I went on to do course after course, motivated by the buzz.

After that I became a treatment co-ordinator. As Mill Lane had a lot of new patients on a daily basis I was very busy and finally I'd reached one of my ultimate goals: I had my own appointment book! I'd made it.

I left Mill Lane to take up the position of practice manager at the BBC. I couldn't become the DPM at Mill Lane at they had a great DPM already in Nicci and she wasn't planning to go anywhere. I needed a new focus and the BBC was it.

The BBC position was within an occupational health department dedicated to servicing BBC employees and of course TV stars. It was a fabulous job! I met hundreds of stars and thoroughly enjoyed building a

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bigger site and doubling the number of clinics and hygienists, creating a top dental team.

Becoming a practice management consultant

Samera is a dedicated team of business advisors, accountants, practice managements and dentists who aim to help build better dental businesses. Samera is unique in its ability to do this as it comprises business advisors who also have their own group of dental clinics, The Neem Tree, so they have hands-on experience to share with clients.

I took up the role of dental practice manager at The Neem Tree when Samera

had just one clinic in Wandsworth and their principal was about to open a second clinic in Canary Wharf. My main responsibility was to bring in everything needed to make Wandsworth still tick without its principal being on site 100% of the time – and to help open the Canary Wharf site.

We soon had two very well oiled machines in the practices at Wandsworth and Canary Wharf. As ever I needed a new challenge and was asked if I wanted to help Samera with their clients. As part of the Samera team I work with many practices for a variety of reasons. When I am asked to visit a practice I am able to review the critical success factors of the practice with the principal and the dental team. I have tried and tested many protocols in my years of experience and these are still tested on a daily basis at The Neem Tree. I think having worked as a dental nurse, a receptionist and a DPM gives me a real advantage as I can relate team needs to business needs and come up with a strategy that will support everyone.

The Ultimate Practice Managers Course was developed from my first year as a consultant with Samera. The dental practice managers that I met needed as much of my time as they could possibly have while I was in their clinic – but this was impossible due to the needs of the client and the practice. So, it was a simple idea to get all the dental practice managers together in one room at the same time so that I could deliver training to them all together.

What makes a good dental practice manager?

- Someone who likes dealing with people. If you don't know how people tick then you have a problem. How to motivate people to do things, how people react and using great communication to get the best out of people are all essential to being a good DPM. You're their manager first and their friend second. Be prepared to do what they do: nursing, desk, clearing up, speaking to patients etc. You need to earn your team members' loyalty.
- Being given the role, not just the job title. I have met a lot of people who have been told they are the manager but don't have any management skills and the practice principal still makes hourly decisions. Dentists need to do clinical work 7-8 hours a day and oversee the manager's role.
- Knowledge and skill – a DPM needs to know as much about dentistry as they can. If you don't know something, go on a course and find out.
- Give your time to your team, all of them. I review performance and give feedback based on the previous 4-6 weeks, normally in an informal setting – over a coffee or a spot of lunch.
- Be available to your team. Each member of my team over the different sites of The Neem Tree knows that they can call me whenever they need to.

The Ultimate Practice Managers Course is offered to all Samera clients free of charge. We meet on a monthly basis at the Samera Training Academy. The programme is completely flexible with regards to which sessions DPMs attend; they can even send another team member if they feel it would be more beneficial to the business.

I think the course has been very successful in creating much more skilled managers; they are encouraged to apply the skills they learn at each session to their own clinics and then report back the following month.

We also add up the total number of years' practice management experience we have in

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the room each month and so far the record is 140 years! I am very proud to think that there can't be many tutors who can state that.

Sylvie's secrets

There are a few essential things that I need to make things happen as they should:

1. **A principal** that supports me and has a clear direction and drive to encourage me. Smita Mehra, our principal at The Neem Tree, has empowered the dental team and me to build an amazing clinic. She is a great listener and with her support our team has built a great business.
2. **Arun Mehra**, my Samera boss. He didn't know what to think of me when we first met as my CV is so long and detailed, but he had the faith in me to manage The Neem Tree and then help him with Samera clients too, which helped my own development. Today I have many successes under my belt and it's great to know that Arun trusts me to go out into the dental world and spread the Samera philosophy.
3. **Systems and protocol.** This is my middle name: you can't run a dental practice without written guidelines and procedures in place for clarity and reference.
4. **A great team.** The right people are essential to the success of any team. We've built a team from scratch in each clinic. There are never going to be people coming to interview that are able to give you all of the skills, abilities, attitude, knowledge and commitment that you need 100% of the time; you take your time to build team members and give them the bits that are missing with meetings, talks and most important of all, TRAINING! You develop people as much as you can within their ability, and as much as the business needs.
5. **A great support network.** I have made hundreds of good friends over many years in the business. If I don't know something I usually know someone else who does.

Sylvie's top tips

- Be a good leader – if your team aren't performing in the way you want or the way the business needs, look at your leadership qualities. If you can, get an outside source to review this for you.
- Create a workplace that's FUN to be in; this treats the team with the respect and warmth that people need to function.
- Empower people: get your team to make decisions with you. Their perspective/views may surprise you.
- Have a watertight recruitment process to get the right people through the door in the first place.
- Do exactly what you say you are going to do. Don't promise what you can't deliver!
- Have a plan and make it your practice philosophy and make sure your team know it. What are you aiming for and how are you going to get there?
- Have systems and policies written down so that they are available from day one for new team members. Currently The Neem Tree has four main manuals that are updated by team members.

My faithful boyfriend Trevor who drove me to my dental nursing course became my husband and we have a 16-year-old son, Charlie. Trevor and I have a 100 foot allotment together near our home in Ealing, which is our pride and joy. We spend a lot of time there growing organic vegetables, most of which we eat ourselves. It is real manual work but the rewards are great and it's a really therapeutic way to spend my time after a long busy week at the clinics.

The Neem Tree has just opened a third clinic in Esher. Find out more at www.theneemtree.co.uk. More information on Samera can be found here: www.samera.co.uk. You can follow Sylvie on Twitter: @sylviesturrock.

SPECIAL OFFER Samera would like to offer Vital readers the opportunity to attend an Ultimate Practice Managers taster day for free. Register your interest at www.samera.co.uk/secrets.

Interview by Kate Maynard.