

When the going gets tough: becoming a dental entrepreneur

After a challenging start, **Dr Wha-Choul Lee** turned his new business into an innovative, modern practice – but how? **Carlotta Eden** talks to **Dr Lee** about overcoming adversities and entrepreneurial spirit

The world ran riot recently when American dentist Walter Palmer shot a 13-year-old protected lion in Zimbabwe with a bow and arrow, before finally hunting it down and decapitating it.

But 'bad dentists' are the stuff of horror movies and books, rather than a reflection of the real-life, conscientious professionals that make up dentistry, surely?

For the most part, yes. But real life isn't always rosy, and humans aren't always compassionate souls dedicated to improving the lives of others. There may be bad dentists, but there are also bad policemen, bad teachers, bad soldiers, bad journalists – so what makes dentists so easy to single out?

Neuroscientists believe sound plays a big part in exacerbating patients' fear of the dentist – the 'whirr of a dentist's drill' is enough to send some patients into a state of severe anxiety, which scientists believe at least 10% of the population suffer with (Sample, 2013; Humphries et al, 2013).

Thankfully, bad press is not something that bothers Dr Wha-Choul Lee, despite having been through 'seven months of hell' working as an associate alongside a verbally abusive and bad-tempered dentist nearing retirement.

'The press want drama and negativity, which only fuels people's fear,' he says, pointing to an article in the *Mail Online* entitled 'Why we all fear dentists are natural born killers'.

'I don't feel that changing the world's perception is as important as changing the local community perception. We get our



Dr Wha-Choul Lee (right) with his family

patients through word of mouth and this is more important to me.'

It was with this ethos in mind that Dr Lee's new and improved practice was born.

A challenging year

In her editorial for *Aesthetic Dentistry Today's* June issue, Linda Greenwall maintains that there are seven characteristics to becoming a successful entrepreneur, including having a clear vision about the future running of your business and working hard for a long time to succeed.

Dr Lee joined his current practice as an associate dentist with the intention of buying the business further down the line. The previous owner was nearing retirement and looking to sell. It seemed the perfect match.

Five months later, he took over as the owner and new principal.

(It is worth noting that at this point in our phone conversation a patient arrives in the practice and Dr Lee excuses himself quickly in order to greet him. I overhear him explain

how the practice works and offer advice about payment plans and an initial consultation. He apologises on the phone to me afterwards, but it stands as another demonstration of his dedication to patients.)

The previous owner carried on working in practice. Dr Lee respected his and his wife's (who was the manager) many years of business experience, and so it was agreed that Dr Lee would consult with them on practice plans.

'I think he misunderstood and thought that I would be dependent on them for everything,' he adds. 'Part of me thinks this is why he would often overstep the mark. He wanted us to follow his rules; he wanted everything done his way despite no longer owning the practice.'

The previous owner was bad tempered and often verbally abusive.

He maintained an uncomfortable environment for his team and especially Dr Lee, putting him in awkward positions in front of his staff and patients.

'I had discussed doing a window etching and putting a sign board in the front garden

Top tips for aspiring entrepreneurs

1. Have a good vision – even if you get diverted, you'll always come back to it
2. Stick to your values – if you do, your staff will follow, otherwise they will end up jumping ship and then you know you're not doing something right
3. Be patient – in time, everything will work out if you've put the time and effort into it.

A bright future

It's been challenging, but Dr Lee says the future is exciting. 'At some stage we would like to introduce a periodontist and orthodontist. The demand isn't high at this stage, even though we are educating patients – it's getting them to appreciate and understand the severity of it, which is why we needed a hygienist because we had undiagnosed perio.'

Dr Lee was recently featured in local papers discussing the 'dark side' of tooth whitening, warning patients to ensure their treatment is being carried out by a credible professional. He also plans on working with local media to produce a piece on sugar and dental tourism.

'I think dentists need to show patients a good personal development plan,' he says. 'The GDC isn't exactly our best friend when it comes to advertising lawsuits to patients, so we're the ones that need to educate patients. If we regularly put those things out there and warn people about the dangers of, say, unqualified beauticians administering Botox, then we're doing what we can.'

It all goes hand-in-hand with being a dental entrepreneur, believes Dr Lee. 'It isn't all money; it's about job satisfaction – seeing staff laugh and smile regularly at work. If it hadn't been for my staff, I wouldn't be smiling. I know everyone wants to boast about their team, but given the amount of stuff we've been through, I think I can honestly say that I've been blessed with amazing staff.'

Before we come to the end of our conversation, I wonder what he thinks about the public and how bad press shapes its perception of dentistry – regardless of whether these horror stories have any foundation.

'The press have a lot to answer for and I don't see the public's perception changing any time soon,' Dr Lee believes. 'I think with the right professional qualifications, a brilliant team and by following regulations, we'll start to win patients over, one by one.'

'That is more important to any dental practice: showing that we care and aiming to be as friendly and pain-free as possible.'

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in order to make the practice more visible,' explains Dr Lee.

'The very next day, after putting the sign up, he asks: "What the hell have you done with my surgery?" This was in front of patients and staff. I told him not to speak to me like that, but he hung up on me.'

'I was then accused of breaching his contract because of changing working conditions. I maintain that putting a sign in front of the practice is not a change in working conditions. I offered to meet with him to discuss the matter, but he never turned up to a meeting. When I did see him, he would shout and shout, and when I mentioned that I had consulted with his wife beforehand, he accused me of blaming her. It was exhausting.'

Certain hygiene protocols were in breach of regulations, but flagging them up fell on deaf ears. So too did pleas to work in a certain way.

'Bear in mind that we are a private practice and we charge patients a lot. He wouldn't use rubber dam or an apex locator during root canal surgeries, even though I wanted them to be part of our standard level of care.'

Dr Lee tried everything. He called the British Dental Association (BDA) for advice, who told him that he wasn't able to do anything without an independent witness. In the end, Dr Lee consulted with a solicitor, who said that his colleague could be dismissed on the grounds of gross misconduct. The solicitor drafted up documentation, sent it across, and the previous owner was sacked.

The aftermath

When Dr Lee took on the role of principal, he moved out of his comfort zone and, at times, felt a little out of depth.

'It takes strength to find the courage to head for new horizons – to embrace and invest in new technologies,' Dr Greenwall wrote in June – something that the previous owner found

difficult to compromise on.

'I'm interested in cosmetic and implant dentistry,' says Dr Lee. 'So I'm looking to expand that side of the practice. I think that's the crux of everything; you can't just look at a tooth and say "you need implants", because you have to consider everything. That's what we try to do here – present a holistic treatment.'

Dr Lee invested in new equipment and instruments to improve the standards in the practice, even changing to a new scaler because patients complained that previous treatments could feel 'brutal'.

He introduced a dental hygienist as well, having discovered incomplete medical histories among the 30% of patients that had been checked for gum disease.

Even though it was a relief to end the by-now fraught relationship, the team weren't surprised when they lost patients to the previous principal's new practice. 'They were loyal to him because they were friends and family,' says Dr Lee, 'and despite his temperament patients had come to know him because his work was predictable.'

But progress at Dr Lee's practice has carried on unabated, gaining even more patients after launching a new and improved website.

Today, the practice receives numerous online enquiries, advertises only in local magazines, and even sponsors the local under-sevens football team.

'We don't charge patients under six years old,' Dr Lee explains. 'We check their diet and plaque control and can hopefully nip any problems in the bud. We're a family practice and we want to show people that we care even outside the surgery.'

Today, Dr Lee feels the practice epitomises that 'entrepreneurial spirit' – the clarity to see new opportunities when they present themselves, and provide the best treatment possible to patients.

References

- Humphries G, Crawford JR, Hill K, Gilbert A, Freeman R (2013) UK population normals for the modified dental anxiety scale with percentile calculator: adult dental health survey 2009 results. *BMC Oral Health*. 13:29
- Sample I (2013) Scared of the dentist? This is why, say neuroscientists [online] Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/10/dentists-drills-brain-neuroscientists>> [Accessed 18/08/15]