

'I'm a dentist that just happens to be on TV. I'm not a celebrity': Uchenna Okoye on her life and career

Uchenna Okoye is used to having the world's eyes on her life and work. But how does she stay grounded? Carlotta Eden talks to Uchenna about success, family, and dreaming big

'I don't know why positivity doesn't sell', says Uchenna Okoye, as we both pour over a recent article entitled Are women being held back by too much smiling? in the *Evening Standard*.

'Everybody loves bad news. Remember when everyone attacked Renée Zellweger when she looked a little different? It was vitriolic!'

It certainly was. Last year, Hollywood actress Renée Zellweger stepped out onto the red carpet with what appeared to be a dramatic face change – gossip columns around the world speculated on what she had done. Blepharoplasty? Botox? Lip fillers?

Renée herself took it all on the chin, citing her new look down to being 'healthy' and 'taking care of herself'.

Uchenna is used to working with celebrities. She understands the demands A-listers (and most often their entourage) ask of their dentist or cosmetic surgeon. But no matter what is being asked of her, Uchenna knows it comes down to just one thing: the individual.

'One of the things I am very strict about is that I never criticise another person's work,' Uchenna maintains. 'Nobody would do bad work on purpose. It's easy to blame the dentist or surgeon in a situation like Renée's, but the patient may have wanted it – we have no idea what they have been through or what the patient requested.'

Asking whether treating celebrities can be challenging, compared to treating non-celebrities, Uchenna smiles, saying: 'You just have to be able to adapt and change things for them and be aware they are in the public eye. My job is to do what's best for the patient, no matter what the scenario.'

First impressions

Best known for her appearance on Channel 4's makeover programme *10 Years Younger*,



'I wanted a practice that focused on the whole body. It isn't just about teeth – it's about the experience'

Uchenna has achieved what most dentists dream of setting out to do: she has garnered trust from the public – and the media.

Born in Nigeria, Uchenna never set out to be a dentist from day one. She was always fascinated with the human body (she describes herself as being 'inquisitive') but dentistry seemed like an odd profession for her to step into, given her unfortunate encounter with a dentist when was around seven years old.

'I thought the dentist was coming to give me an ice cream,' she says. 'But he actually came to extract my tooth. No anaesthetic, nothing!'

To this day, Uchenna still squirms as she recounts the memory. But on the plus side, she says it's influenced the way she runs her own business.

'When I was being treated by a dentist, it

was all about teeth – it wasn't about me the human being. So that was what set me on the road to setting up my own practice that focused on the whole body. Our practices don't smell like a dental practice – there are candles and soft lighting. It's all about the experience.'

Uchenna eventually saw dentistry as 'a brilliant profession where I could be creative and get to know people', one in which she could 'be her own boss'.

And soon, London Smiling was born, with three dental practices spread throughout the capital.

'Did I know what I was doing? I had no idea!' she laughs. 'But I started going to the USA and attending conferences such as the Greater New York Dental Meeting and the American Association of Cosmetic Dentistry,

and I saw this whole world that fascinated me. Aesthetic dentistry is very customer focused, because people don't need it. And I love that – it means I need to make sure they're having a good experience.'

Little imperfections

Uchenna says her signature smile is 'to look like you but better'.

It's the same ethos that's kept *10 Years Younger* going since 2004, and Uchenna is grateful for her experience on the show.

'I loved it. It is incredibly hard work; you really have to think outside of the box. But I think the show has enabled people to see the before and after of someone's smile; viewers could see what was possible by showing them that it's not just movie stars that get their smile fixed, it's parents and teachers who want to make a difference to their confidence.'

Although Uchenna believes the British are more 'conservative' with their appearance compared to Americans, she believes the gap has closed a lot in aesthetic dentistry over the last few decades.

'I think there's more choice in the UK compared to the US, although when I first started out there was a complete divide. Americans want immediate results; Brits tend to be more conservative. We're more health focused, I think, whereas Americans are driven by appearance.'

Uchenna goes on to explain getting caught at a crossfire between the US and the UK 'sides' while working as a dentist on the 2012 film *Snow White and the Huntsman*.

'I was told to fix Prince Charming's crooked teeth – the UK arm told me he shouldn't look too perfect, but the US arm said he had to have straight teeth! In the end, we compromised, but it shows the different perspectives.'

Having spent many years going back and forth between the UK and the USA, Uchenna has been at the forefront of changes in facial aesthetics, and one of the biggest changes she's noticed is the integration of facial aesthetics as the 'norm'.

'I'm old enough to remember the controversy about whether dentists should do Botox. I never understood what the issue was – as dentists, we should be the ones focusing on the head and neck.'

'I'm really pleased that we've moved on from that. I got more involved with facial aesthetics while doing *10 Years Younger* because it frustrated me when patients would come back having had all these fillers, and they just look weird!'

'In the US, if you have a facelift, they send you to the dentist first; if I do your smile, you'll look younger and need less surgery. At the moment, clinicians over here aren't really thinking that way, so I am trying to educate doctors.'

But although Uchenna believes more education for dentists and doctors is key, she is happy to admit that the industry has taken huge steps already. Dentists are getting more involved in conferences and speaking out about facial aesthetics. It's become integrated into dentistry – and society. 'It's no longer a dirty little secret to admit you've had Botox,' she notes. 'And I'm glad.'

Making a difference

Uchenna was twice voted European Professional Black Woman of the Year, and is continually lauded by both *Vogue* and *Tatler* – but it hasn't always been smooth sailing.

Asking her what accolades like that mean to her, she says: 'Those kinds of accolades show me that I'm doing something right. It's encouraging for my team and me. I do a lot of mentoring, so I love showing people what's possible.'

It isn't all talk with Uchenna. Her and her husband Chidi, an ex-athlete and surgeon, have launched a foundation called UCAN to



Dr Uchenna Okoye believes botox is no longer a 'dirty little secret' and patients are now happier to admit when they've had work done

motivate young black children to progress into education. Her future plans also include opening a practice in Nigeria – Lagos Smiling.

'I lost my sister last year and I want to dedicate the charity to her,' Uchenna explains. 'She loved education and wanted to open her own school. I want to be able to make a difference and show people less fortunate what's possible.'

It's family that keeps Uchenna grounded. Financial success, celebrity smiles – all that comes second to realising what is truly important. 'Making a difference and relieving people of pain,' says Uchenna. 'I'm a dentist that just happens to be on TV. I'm not a celebrity. When the media have moved on, the dentistry will still be there.'

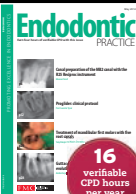
Perhaps they will – but they don't seem to be going anywhere just yet. I guess once you've fixed Prince Charming's crooked teeth, you can expect to be in demand all around the world.

Care to comment? @AesDenToday

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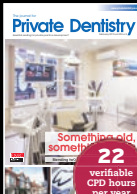


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