Putting something back

Dental Tribune profiles Seema Sharma, her career in dentistry, her love of business management and her journey from Millionaire to Mumbai

Seema Sharma is the owner of a few successful dental practices in London, where she also runs a training business and management consultancy, Dentalyte Limited, looks after a property portfolio and has recently set up her own charitable foundation. All this she combines with bringing up two daughters with her cardiologist husband Sanjay.

It is not a bad list of achievements for someone who describes herself as a ‘bit of a dabbler’.

Last year she added a new title when she became Channel 4’s Slumdog Secret Millionaire, distributing much needed support for the street kids and slum dwellers of Mumbai. It is not a description she enjoys, but Seema says she has no regrets about taking part in the television series and raising awareness.

“I believe that if a bus of opportunity comes past you should get on it. This was a one-off opportunity, a chance of a lifetime. I had also become much more interested recently in my own cultural background, and thought this might be a way to give something back.”

Seema qualified as a dentist 18 years ago. She chose this path because she felt it was a job she could combine with having a family. Although she enjoyed the clinical work and was able to set up her own practice at the age of 24, she found it was the actual running of the business that gave her the most pleasure. Inefficiencies in the practice frustrated her and she discovered she was good at finding solutions. So under her guidance the business began to flourish.

Soon she was spending more time as a practice lead than as a dentist, and even though she had become the mother of two daughters she still found the time and energy to pursue her enthusiasm – property. In 1999 she saw the opportunity to buy a run down period house in London and renovate it. It doubled in value and she enjoyed the process so much that in 2004 she decided to buy and renovate another one.

At the same time she took a chance and bought her Docklands dental premises when it came up for auction. It was a commercial investment that paid off in 2006 when she sold it on to a property developer and became a millionaire on the proceeds. These property gains have enabled her to further expand the core dental business. With a new business partner she put in a successful bid for a practice in Surrey.

Shortly afterwards they bid for another in East London, where Seema has spent all her working life, and won a fiercely competitive competitive blended NHS contract tender for a new type of holistic practice in Bow, catering for underprivileged communities in East London. By this time the original practice had morphed into a small group, and Seema no longer had time to practise clinical dentistry. Instead she devoted her energies to running the business, and on management training.

The process of building the business was not, she insists, the result of a thought-out plan. “I just followed my inclination to sort things out, to improve things, and gradually evolved into being a leader. There was never an expansion plan. It was more of an organic development, of investing in people who could free me up so I could develop new activities.”

By delegating day-to-day management to her team, Seema was able to turn her attention to new business opportunities. For years she has managed a medical teaching course for junior doctors, designed and run by her cardiologist husband, Prof Sanjay Sharma, and from this she built a practice management consultancy supporting dentists preparing for blended contracting and Care Quality Commission registration.

The capital gains she made from her well-timed forays into the property market have now enabled Seema to safeguard the financial fut-ure for her family as well as expand her dental business. This year she has bought a new building to relocate the Docklands practice into state of the art space, and plans to devote 25 per cent of her time to her charitable activities.

Seema says that donations are beginning to roll into the Sharma Foundation, as she builds on the publicity from the TV programme. Her intention is to turn the charity into the kind of organisation that can make a difference to the lives of poor children in India. That is an ambitious project, but her track record suggests that Seema will not be satisfied with half measures. She is considering commissioning a double decker bus for a challenge team of London bus drivers to drive from Marble Arch to Mumbai to donate to Doordstep School – the school on wheels she met during the making of the programme – although she has not decided if she will get on this particular bus....watch this space.

Seema will be speaking at the Clinical Innovations Conference about her journey to success, and the satisfaction of putting something back.