

A single-minded crusade

How dental nurse **Jo Dawson** changed school snacking policy with her one-woman campaign

‘Nowadays, parents are generally more conscious of the quality of the snacks they are purchasing for their children and are on the lookout for healthy snacking alternatives. There are the obvious sugary snacks that are regularly flagged up by the media and these are easy to identify as unhealthy. Then sadly there are the other snacks which appear healthy but aren’t always.’

So says dental nurse and oral health educator, Jo Dawson, who works at Devonshire House Dental Practice in Cambridge. She understands that parents can only do their best with what they know and perceive as healthy and guilt-free options, so continuing parental education whenever possible is so important.

When Jo realised that the parents at her children’s primary school were receiving misleading information on snacks that could actually lead to their children getting tooth decay, she had to do something about it.

When her daughter started school, Jo became aware that the government-funded School Fruit and Vegetable Service (SFVS) were giving out raisins and sultanas as snacks to four to six year old pupils on the first day of each half term, essentially going against the advice in the *Delivering better oral health: an evidence-based toolkit for prevention*¹ directive.

Raisin Awareness

After expressing initial surprise that dried fruits were not tooth-friendly snacks, the head teacher explained the scheme only provided them six times a year when fresh produce could not be delivered and, therefore, it didn’t carry a huge risk – hence the matter was not worth pursuing. Then two years ago, when her child moved up into Key Stage 2, Jo discovered that the parents of older children were allowed to bring in their own snacks including dried fruit every single day, convinced that it was healthy. The school continued to supply raisins for five to seven year olds, as they couldn’t afford to buy replacements and, although sympathetic, they felt unable to change the snack policy whilst giving them out.



Jo quickly gained support for Raisin Awareness from the British Society of Paediatric Dentists (BSPD). As Claire Stevens commented: ‘Dried fruit such as raisins can form part of a healthy diet, but we recommend that they are eaten sparingly and at mealtimes. Drying fruit concentrates the sugars and creates a food which can stick to teeth and cause decay. For this reason, whole fresh fruit and vegetables are a much safer snack for children. Well done to Jo for her single-minded crusade.’

Jo approached Duncan Selbie, founding Chief Executive of Public Health England who put her in touch with Director of Dental Public Health at PHE, Dr Sandra White, and National Lead for Child Oral Health Improvement, Jenny Godson. After

long discussions, and a letter to DHSC, the feedback to her MP was that it was essentially a logistical issue (delivery) that could not be resolved.

Unsatisfied, Jo evolved a scheme to involve the dental practice where she works. The practice owners welcomed her initiative and agreed to pay for fresh vegetables to be provided to the local primary school on the first day of half term. This encouraged the school’s Governors to change the whole school policy and prohibit dried fruits from being brought into the school for break time snacks.

The COVID-19 pandemic then struck and whilst waiting to hear back from the British Dental Association (BDA) and Oral Health Foundation about their support, although determined to show that the



Jo Dawson.

change was possible on a national scale, Jo felt unsure how to take things forward.

Smile Revolution

At around this time Jo saw that Philips Oral Healthcare was running a competition to win a sponsored place on Victoria Wilson's Smile Revolution five-week course to 'Launch Your Own Oral Health Promotional Project/Business'. She felt that it could provide her with the push she needed to take her project further. The course was designed to help dental professionals plan the launch of an oral health promotion venture; Philips sponsored the place – worth £1,000 – as a way of reinforcing its ongoing support to dental professionals. The course mission was to drive leadership in dentistry through innovation in oral health promotion. Jo won the sponsored place and it directly led to a whole new world of possibilities for her.

It has given her renewed inspiration and further knowledge to continue pursuing her original goal of SFVS supplying fresh produce nationwide every day, but with an added focus on best practice and having a measurable impact on the children's oral health.

With her newly acquired skills, Jo is planning the next phase to link up other dental practices with more primary schools to educate head teachers and parents, so that a wider number of children can benefit from tooth friendly schooldays and have better long-term dental health experience. Information on



Victorial Wilson.

how your practice can get involved will be released soon.

Jo commented: 'I also applaud Marcus Rashford for his petition to end child food poverty for struggling families without access to free school meals over the school holidays. Oral health promotion upholds the same values and aspirations of reducing inequalities, and this is now my quest too. We may just be throwing stones in a pond but the ripple effect could be huge.'

She concludes: 'I am so grateful to Philips who gave me access to that place on Victoria's course. We are all so busy in practice and it is sometimes hard to imagine that one can have spare time for projects outside of work, especially now with the backlog after COVID-19 shutdown. The course has shown me that we must try to reach people in different places - outside the dental practice – think outside the box to have a greater positive impact. I hope I have been able to open some people's eyes that dentistry should not be feared and good oral health should be promoted. It's rewarding helping my community and I encourage my peers to look around them and find areas where their knowledge and expertise can also make a difference.'

Reference

1. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/605266/Delivering_better_oral_health.pdf

For more about Philips Oral Healthcare please visit www.philips.co.uk/dentalprofessional

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About Smile Revolution

The Smile Revolution leads on oral health promotion, through driving leadership in dentistry. Dental caries is the most prevalent preventable disease globally. We create content to help overcome this.

How do we do this?

We create content to inspire the dental profession to support their advancements, and create content promoting oral health for the public.

Join the Smile Revolution today – Through listening to our podcast and sharing what inspires you, and taking that inspiration forward.

Register for our course on how to create sustainable oral health promotional projects with impact.

Join Smile Revolution Yoga dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of the dental profession, and simply feel you are taking time out for your wellbeing.

Use our resources available for the dental profession and the public.

Simply get inspired and fully embrace leadership in dentistry.

Our Mission

To help overcome oral health inequalities around the world. Smiles can change the world. We can advance so much faster as a dental profession through continuously sharing everything we learn, why waste time learning what someone else has already learnt.

Share through the Smile Revolution and we will advance so much faster as a dental profession, to help achieve our mission of overcoming oral health inequalities around the world.

For more information about Victoria Wilson and Smile Revolution, visit <http://www.smile-revolution.net/>