

Breaking Barriers in Social Care: An Inspiring Conversation with Debbie Harris, Founder of Autumna

Q: Debbie, can you start by telling us a little about yourself and what led you to found Autumna?

Like many people in social care, my journey started with a personal need. Over ten years ago, my aunt, Aunt Margaret, needed a care home, and I was tasked with finding one. I had no experience with care homes, no knowledge of the regulator, and no idea where to start. I remember sitting at my kitchen table, using the Yellow Pages to call homes one by one—just hoping I'd find a good fit for her. It was pure luck rather than informed decision-making that led me to a place where she was happy. That experience made me realise how incredibly difficult it is for families to navigate the system.

I decided something needed to change. I had previously built a company that helped me understand the market from both the care provider and consumer perspective. That insight was critical. Six and a half years ago, I started building Autumna, and we went live five years ago. Our mission is simple: to empower families by providing them with the information they need to make informed care decisions.

Q: You launched Autumna just six months before COVID hit. How did the pandemic impact your business, and what were some key lessons learned?

Interestingly, we didn't have to pivot much because we had already recognised the need for more comprehensive information online. Pre-pandemic, care providers were often hesitant to put too much detail on their websites. They preferred personal engagement, wanting to show potential residents their ethos and care in person. Then, COVID shut that down overnight. Families still needed to find care, but they couldn't visit in person. That's when care homes started to embrace our concept of 'opening your online windows and doors.'

Autumna was already structured to support this shift. We have 240 search filters—ten times more than what was available elsewhere - so families could make informed choices from home. The pandemic accelerated what we were building, pushing providers to be more transparent online, and we facilitated that transition.

Q: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in developing Autumna, and how did you overcome them?

Tech. Without a doubt, tech was my biggest challenge. My background is in understanding care seekers and families, not in running a tech company. But in reality, Autumna is a tech company. Everything we do is digital.

One of the most striking statistics is that 40% of people search for care outside office hours. So even though we have a seven-day-a-week advice line, we needed to ensure people could find the information they needed at 2am. That meant automating aspects of the process while maintaining the human element. It was a steep learning curve, but I'm proud that Autumna stands firmly on its humanity, expertise, and understanding of families.

Breaking Barriers in Social Care: An Inspiring Conversation with Debbie Harris, Founder of Autumna

Q: You recently launched OpenScore. Can you tell us what it is and how it differs from traditional rating systems like the CQC?

OpenScore was born out of a critical gap in information. During COVID, families stopped asking us, 'Where's the best care home near me?' and started asking, 'Where's the safest care home near me?' That distinction was important. People didn't just want ratings; they wanted transparency about infection prevention, food quality, environmental credentials, and more.

We developed a series of badges—starting with safety, then dining standards, and later sustainability (Go Green). But we quickly realised that families needed an aggregated score to make quick, informed decisions. OpenScore pulls together over 60 data points, including CQC ratings, food standards, registered manager details, visibility of fees, and our own research, to give each care provider a score out of ten. Over 2,000 care homes are now using it.

It launched just as Wes Streeting criticised the CQC's outdated rating system. With CQC inspections averaging three years and eight months old, families needed real-time, live assessments. OpenScore provides that.

Q: You've also developed a tool to improve hospital discharge processes. Can you explain how it works?

Yes, we call it DAD—Dashboard for Accelerated Discharge. The hospital discharge process is one of the biggest bottlenecks in our healthcare system. Thousands of people sit in hospital beds for months—sometimes over a year—when they no longer need medical care simply because there's no efficient system to place them in appropriate settings.

Recently, a hospital in Wales contacted us about a patient who had been waiting for a care placement for a year. We used DAD to reach out to 58 care homes within a 15-mile radius. Within three days, he had a successful trial placement. Three days! They had been trying for a year. The solution is there. The problem is a lack of connectivity between health and social care. DAD provides that connectivity.

Q: You've mentioned that only 4% of female founders receive venture capital or VC funding. What has been your experience navigating investment as a woman in tech and care?

I've never gone for VC funding because I wanted to retain control over our ethos. We don't take referral fees. I strongly believe that social care and referral fees don't mix, it doesn't sit right to 'sell' someone's contact details. Instead, I secured funding through my local council and angel investors who aligned with our mission. I also put in my own money. If you believe in what you're doing, put your money where your mouth is.

The investment world needs to change. More women need seats at the table in VC firms. They need to recognise that women pitch differently—we may be more cautious, but we build sustainable businesses. Investors are short-sighted if they overlook social care; it's an industry that isn't going anywhere.

Breaking Barriers in Social Care: An Inspiring Conversation with Debbie Harris, Founder of Autumna

Q: What advice would you give to women looking to start their own businesses, particularly in care and technology?

Just do it. Don't wait for permission. There will always be reasons not to start—lack of funding, lack of knowledge, lack of time, but if you believe in your idea, act. I knew nothing about technology when I started. I had never even sent an email! But I learned. The biggest difference between those who succeed and those who don't is that the successful ones don't wait.

Q: Finally, what has been the most rewarding aspect of building Autumna?

The families we help. Recently, when that hospital told me we had found a care home for that gentleman after a year, I was bouncing in my seat. That's why I do this. If we can take even a fraction of the stress away from families and improve care provision in the UK, then every long hour and every challenge is worth it.

Find out more about Autumna: <https://www.autumna.co.uk/>