

Meet IYASU, empowering women working in healthcare with cruelty-free and sustainable luxury bags

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Catherine Fernando, CEO of IYASU Medical Bags about a passion for sustainable fashion, empowering healthcare providers and celebrating female empowerment.

Temps de lecture : minute

15 July 2023

IYASU, (which means “to heal”), was launched when I decided to take a sabbatical from my full-time role as a GP to pursue my passion for sustainable fashion after being uninspired and frustrated by the lack of medical bags designed for women. I noticed there was a crowded market for masculine healthcare bags reflecting the historical male dominance in the medical profession; however, despite a huge change in the demographic of healthcare workers over the past century, available styles of this essential piece of work equipment lacked any feminine appeal. I also felt that traditional medical bags had too few pockets.

The health of people and of our planet is at the heart of IYASU’s philosophy so each IYASU Vegan Medical Bag is constructed from recycled materials. We chose recycled plastic bottles (rPET) and high-quality post-consumer vegan leather. This is kinder to the world as it reduces plastic in oceans and landfill and leaves a significantly reduced carbon footprint compared to animal leather. The thoughtfully constructed interior layout of IYASU bags transforms the way medical professionals carry and

organise their equipment, offering a practical yet stylish option for many women in healthcare. As a doctor myself, I understand the needs of female healthcare professionals from my own personal experience.

Each IYASU bag is named after an inspirational, pioneering woman in medicine, and has been meticulously designed to address the specific challenges faced by medical professionals. The goal is to empower healthcare providers and enhance patient care through innovative solutions. Also, to celebrate female empowerment, we donate 5% of our profits to charities which support girls' education.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

IYASU Medical Bags are luxury vegan bags made for doctors by a doctor. They are suitable for a wide range of healthcare professionals, including physicians, nurses, paramedics and allied healthcare providers. The bags are also ideal for medical students and home healthcare providers who require a reliable and organised storage solution for their medical supplies.

The bags incorporate a comprehensive compartmentalised system, allowing healthcare professionals to efficiently organise and access their medical supplies. IYASU Medical Bags are built to withstand the demanding nature of healthcare environments whilst being sustainably sourced. Our recycled materials are water-resistant, providing an additional layer of protection for delicate medical equipment, ensuring that they remain in optimal condition.

We have recently launched in the UK and hope to become a leading global supplier of healthcare bags by being the number one choice for

women in medicine around the world. We work with various companies which supply equipment and education for healthcare professionals and influential doctors and nurses to reach our customers. All of our IYASU models are real healthcare professionals and each receive an IYASU bag as a thank you gift to use in their workplace.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

We only launched in March 2023 so we are a very new business but already we have evolved in terms of our marketing and branding. Like any new business, there is a lot of 'trial and see' and we are constantly tweaking our branding and our content style on our social media platforms. We have been overwhelmed by the enthusiastic feedback we have received at medical conferences and by our positive online reviews but we also like to hear about the experience of our customers and improvements we can make to our products. We love engaging with other innovative, entrepreneurial healthcare professionals and collaborating towards a shared goal. We have recently started working with Dr Khadija Owusu who is passionate about representation of all ethnicities in medicine, and we are supporting her charity, AKAYA, which focuses on healthier lives for girls in Ghana.

Tell us about the working culture at IYASU

It is just me and my husband at the moment, so the culture is very hands on, where we both do all the tasks, no matter how menial they are. We are both doctors by vocation and we have four children, so life is very busy. However, we both share a very strong work ethic and have always had to be conscientious and dedicated to achieve success in our medical careers. We apply that same philosophy and determination to IYASU. When working with suppliers, the approach is a trusting, creative and

collaborative with a desire to explore as many opportunities as possible.

How are you funded?

IYASU is almost entirely personally funded through our family savings, supported by my husband's work in General Practice and Medical Education and my current locum GP work. I was fortunate to receive some grants from Scottish Enterprise and my local Business Gateway organisation. They provided me with Innovation Expert Support, an Intellectual Property Audit, some funding towards the initial Designs and my first meeting with Branding and Marketing. I am also extremely grateful for their advice and willingness to provide expertise on all business matters. In addition, I'm thankful to organisations such as Accelerate Her for the work they do to help female entrepreneurs.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Overcoming cancer as a junior doctor was my biggest personal challenge. At 22 I was diagnosed with Hodgkin Lymphoma and had to take a break from my medical training to undergo chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I lost my hair and my confidence. Soon after that I lost my best friend to breast cancer and my dad to heart failure. However, I returned to medicine four months later and completed my MRCP exams. I've always been ambitious and I don't let much stop me. Having been on the other side of the table I have a lot of empathy with my patients and I don't mind sharing my story with them. Sometimes it helps people get through difficult times. As a survivor, I want to make the most of my life and embrace every opportunity.

How does IYASU answer an unmet need?

IYASU fixes a huge gap in the market for female medical professionals, the traditional Gladstone bag that is typically used by doctors was designed at a time when only men were allowed to practice medicine. The industry has been trapped in that time with a gender discrimination towards medical accessories, despite female GPs now out numbering male GPs.

IYASU medical bags are designed to suit the needs of women working in healthcare by offering a range of cruelty-free and sustainable luxury vegan medical bags. Inspired by the most influential female doctors in history, the bags effortlessly combine style with practical functionality, meeting the needs of many female medical professionals.



What's in store for the future?

We would love to expand our range of products to include conference, travel bags and a unisex range for private healthcare. Many men have asked us to include bags for them as they love the sustainable and functional ethos of the brand. We would also like to see each style available in a wider range of colours enabling our customers to express their personality.

I would like to explore further eco-friendly textile options such as entirely plant-sourced vegan leathers. This is an exciting field of research and

materials have already been produced from pineapple, grapes, apples, and mushrooms. Unfortunately, none were viable for use at the time our first production run. However, we aim to move to these type of products in the future.

At present we are focused on our launch within the UK but there is a huge potential market for our products in Europe, the USA and Canada. We have sold bags to the USA but postage is rather prohibitive for most international deliveries at present.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Listen to the feedback from all of the experts you work with and don't let arrogance prevent you from changing direction. Accept constructive criticism and adapt accordingly. Saying that, in order to succeed you must believe in yourself and keep focused on your dream. Starting a business takes enormous courage, self-belief and persistence. Sometimes I didn't have all of those things but thankfully my husband did, and his support enabled me to push forward every day until IYASU became a reality.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Like many working mums during "lockdown" I felt overwhelmed and anxious. I was working for the NHS, trying to start my business, home-teaching four primary school aged children on my "days off" and caring for my mum who had recently been diagnosed with dementia.

As a doctor I'm used to long hours and helping people with their problems. Many health professionals find it difficult to prioritise

themselves, but it is important to find time to do things which make us feel alive and happy. This boosts our resilience so that we can give back to others. Exercise is a priority for physical and mental health and I enjoy cycling around my home county of East Lothian. I also adore spending quality time with our children. My girls love dancing, gymnastics, baking and beach days. My son is a very keen rugby player and likes nothing better than supporting Scotland at Murrayfield.

Catherine Fernando is the CEO of *IYASU Medical Bags*.

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