

## Who Needs Geritol? GIVE US BRIGHTER SMILES!

It's a potent message: Studies show the aging baby boomer generation puts a premium on youthfulness and is willing to pay for cosmetic dentistry. They want a smile for the ages.

**By: Daniel McCann, Dental Practice Report, June 2001**

Patricia Dey, 64, of Covington, La., was adamant-or so she thought. Yes, her teeth would benefit from whitening, but it wasn't something she needed-or so she told herself. And on it went for two years: Each time Dey thought about bleaching her teeth, her deeply rooted practicality quickly squelched the idea.

"I kept telling myself I don't really have to have them whitened," she says. "But every time I would smile in the mirror, it would say, 'You really ought to have that done.'" Things finally came to a head when Dey saw her niece Rita's new veneers. Dey was entranced by the result. "I loved how her teeth looked," she says. "I then decided I had to have my teeth whitened." In March of 2000, Dey scheduled a bleaching appointment.

And today: "I think it's one of the best things I've done for myself," she says. "I just didn't like having yellow teeth; I don't care if I was 100, I still wouldn't like having yellow teeth."

Across the country, dentists report, a growing number of older adults like Dey are seeking cosmetic dental treatments. As part of the American Dental Association/Colgate Oral Health Trend Survey, conducted at the ADA's annual convention last fall, dentists were asked which services their 40-to 60-year-old patients most often requested. More than 66 percent of the dentists ranked tooth whitening first, and 65 percent of the practitioners cited "other cosmetic procedures," such as crowns and bonding, as the second most popular treatments.

Moreover, observers say we're only at the start of what promises to be a surging trend. The driving force, they point out, will be supplied by the 76 million aging baby boomers, who historically have placed a high value on youthfulness and appearance.

**The youth obsession.** In 1986, one of those observers, psychologist and gerontologist Ken Dychtwald, Ph.D., founded Age Wave, a San Francisco-based research firm aimed at helping companies market products and services to adults 50 years old and older. "Within our [baby boomer] marketplace," he says, "there persists an overwhelming youth obsession. Most

product developers, marketers and advisors still only give lip service to the needs of our aging population, despite the fact that during the past decade, mature men and women have become the most affluent and active consumers in the history of the American marketplace."

**Don't "sell" to seniors.** For nearly 20 years, Dr. Lorin Berland of Dallas has focused on treating adult patients. He estimates that about 60 percent of those he treats are over 50 years old. As with Moreau, Berland stresses the importance of building trust with senior patients.

"A lot of dentists," says Berland, "feel like they have to be cheerleaders and get their whole staff to cheerlead and sell the patients to do the work. But I don't do that at all. I think it's overkill." Berland will present the treatment plan, then tell the patient he'd like to provide the service and that he thinks it will improve their lives, and then let the patient decide. Going further than that, he says, is "a turnoff for older people."

Cosmetic imaging, says Berland, is an especially effective communication tool for older adults. "I like imaging because it's a soft sell," he says. "They understand it and then you drop it. They'll kick it around for a while and show the images to their spouses, friends and relatives. Then let them call you. They like that. And you'd be surprised at how often those images interest others who see them; they're often a good source for referrals."

**The special needs of seniors.** Treating adults of advancing age, especially those who are 65 and over, can involve special case management. They may require multiple appointments for a procedure ordinarily accomplished during one visit for a patient 30 years younger. Also, "they may need more breaks during treatment," says Berland. "Whenever you even sense that there's fatigue, you might ask if they'd like to take a break, use the restroom or use a bite block to keep their mouths open."

Of course, the older the patient the greater the potential for medical complications. Consequently, taking thorough medical histories is a priority before treating the elderly...

Despite the potential challenges involved in treating some seniors, the satisfaction for dentists can reach beyond monetary benefits. Dr. Berland recalls a 60-year-old psychiatrist who came to him for full-mouth reconstruction.

"She said to me, 'You know, I love what you did for me. At my age there's not a whole lot you can do to make yourself look better other than to give yourself a beautiful smile.'"

Berland adds that seniors make the best patients. "As long as you have patience with them, they have patience with you. And they're very easy to impress with everything we can do in dentistry today-because they remember how dentistry used to be."