

As a Business Owner, Are Your Personal Assets at Risk?

RELAX TV



Tooth and Nails

WANT A FACIAL WITH THAT FILLING? SPA DENTISTRY COMBINES BOTH. BY AMY GREEN

Ernie Capobianco sees his dentist about every two months. He enjoys it.

"He makes the whole dental experience fun, if you can believe that," says Capobianco, 45, a partner in a Dallas advertising agency.

That's because a visit with Capobianco's dentist can feel like visiting a spa. A routine teeth cleaning comes with a vibrating chair, headphones with music, a foot massage and hand massage—all complimentary. Microdermabrasion facials and waxes are available for a fee.

This is how a growing number of

dentists across the country are making dreaded office visits a little less dreaded. It's called spa dentistry, and practitioners say it's hardly frivolous. They credit it with alleviating the anxiety that drives patients away, therefore encouraging preventative care. It can even reduce the need for anesthetic drugs, they say.

About half the dentists queried by the American Dental Association in 2003 for an annual survey said they offered some sort of spa or office amenity. Most common were neck rests, warm towels and complimen-

tary snacks and beverages. Five percent offered massages, facials, manicures and pedicures.

Spa dentistry is part of a broader emphasis on patient care that dates back more than 10 years, when dentists first began making their offices resemble spas by removing that plastic window separating patients from receptionists, says Dr. Kimberly Harms, spokeswoman for the ADA. Eventually they offered coffee, cookies and juice. Headphones drowned out the drill's ugly sound, and virtual reality glasses

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kept patients rapt in movies. Soon patients were indulging in warm towels, blankets and massages.

"Going to the dentist has kind of gotten a bad rap over the years, and we're trying to change that," says Harms. "The more we can get our patients to come for their routine care and preventative care, the healthier they're going to be in the long run."

In response to growing popularity, the ADA offered a lecture on spa dentistry for the first time last year at its convention in Orlando, Florida. And the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry convention in Nashville, Tennessee, offered a lecture on spa dentistry as well.

The University of the Pacific School of Dentistry in San Francisco is the nation's first to offer a course in spa dentistry. The course, now in its second year, is an elective and is taught by Dr. Lynn Watanabe, whose dental spa in Pacific Palisades, California, offers a variety of massages and skin care therapies—even a makeup line. Watanabe also is founder of the International Dental Spa Association, with members in South Korea and Brazil.

Watanabe began offering spa services in 2002 to ease patients' fears of dentistry. In 2003 she surveyed more than 100 patients and found anxiety dipped significantly among those who had a 20-minute hand, foot or neck massage sometime during their treatment.

"We have mothers and fathers who come in; they can get a half-hour massage while their child gets his teeth cleaned," she says. "It's multitasking. People are getting busier and busier, so it's very appealing to people."

Dr. Lorin Berland, who treats Capobianco at the Dallas Dental Spa, found that patients' pulse and blood pressure don't spike as much with dental injections after they've had a massage. He began offering massages in 1996 after having one himself on a business trip. He wanted to hire another employee at the time and decided to bring on a massage therapist. His patients now get massages of the feet, back, shoul-

ders, neck and especially the hands, where there is a pressure point that stimulates the mouth, he says. It's complimentary, part of the dental treatment.

An assistant offers microdermabrasion facials and waxings for a fee, but Berland says his aim is not to compete with spas. He feels the emphasis on patient care is a natural development for dentistry, "espe-

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cially for something tinged with emotion, that's generally associated with discomfort and pain."

Other dentists are making changes. Dr. Phillip Shipp in Nashville began offering paraffin hand wax treatments and chairs with vibrating massage pads two years ago. He later replaced the massage pads with Tempur-pedic mattresses when he found the pads were uncomfortable for patients getting lengthy treatments. He also offers snacks and beverages, warm towels and headphones. It's all complimentary.


"It's still a dental office. Let's not lose sight of that," he says. "But there's no reason why you shouldn't be nice and comfortable while you're here."

Capobianco used to see the dentist less frequently before he began seeing Berland five years ago. Now he impresses friends and

clients with tales from the dentist's office, which he visits more frequently.

"It's totally relaxing," he says. "When I tell people about this dentist they say, I have to switch dentists. And then they can't believe it."

Dr. Berland in Dallas now gets calls from dentists across the country seeking advice about how to add full-body massages,

manicures and pedicures to their practices. He believes spa dentistry has caught on as insurance coverage has lost pace with rising dental costs. If patients must spend their own money, they feel they might as well have a massage while they're at it, he says. 

NASHVILLE-BASED WRITER **AMY GREEN** HAS WRITTEN FOR PEOPLE, THE BOSTON GLOBE, THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR AND MANY OTHERS.
