

'Dental spas' pamper those who know drill too well

By Rex W. Huppke
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Those who can't imagine a soothing dental experience never have awaited a root canal with their hands dipped in warm, moisturizing paraffin wax. They haven't enjoyed a pre-drill foot massage amid the scent of lavender candles and fresh cranberry-orange bread.

In short, they haven't encountered "spa dentistry," where neck rubs, virtual-reality glasses, juice bars, even the lulling sound of wind chimes are used to distract patients from plaque scrapers and novocaine shots.

This pampering approach is aimed at erasing dentistry's "painful past," said Timothy Dotson, owner of the Perfect Teeth Dental Spa in Chicago's Roscoe Village neighborhood.

"It's not about gimmicks," he said as a patient drew a breath of strawberry-scented nitrous oxide. "It's treating people the way they want to be treated. It helps a lot of people overcome fear."

Although few dentists currently offer full-scale spa services—no one tracks exactly how many—the Chicago-based American Dental Association expects the numbers to grow rapidly. Picking up on the trend, the Chicago Dental Society will become the first major dental organization to offer a class on the new techniques at its annual



Tribune photo by Bill Hogan

Dental assistant Elsie Contreras puts headphones on Talia Medina, whose hands are undergoing a paraffin wax treatment.

midwinter conference at the end of the month.

Amenities such as hot towels and white-wine spritzers are appearing with increasing frequency as dentists try to meet changing consumer demands.

With patients already seeking aesthetic improvements—everything from whitening teeth to using enamel to shape a perfect smile—spa dentistry practi-

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tioners say it was a logical next step to add the extra perks.

"People don't just want to be disease-free, they want to look better," said David Fulton Jr., a Waukegan dentist and director of the Chicago Dental Society. "This has opened up many avenues for dentists."

And surprisingly, many of the dentists say they are not charging for the extras. The cost of most spa services, they say, is more than covered by an increase in patient referrals and repeat business.

While dental offices from Los Angeles to Madison Avenue and throughout the Chicago area are adopting spa techniques, some question whether this touchy-feely approach is good dentistry or just a passing fad.

"I just can't see mingling the two businesses together," said Peter Robinson, dean of the University of Connecticut's Dental School. "I would like to think we're in the oral health care business. Maybe I'm just old-fashioned."

Dotson admits he's anything but old-fashioned. His waiting room is equipped with an Xbox video game console to keep children entertained and an electric foot massager to calm adults.

A bread machine fills the office with bakery-fresh scents, and clusters of candles burn near each dental chair. Patients sit within arm's reach of aromatherapy eye pads and a variety of lotions: melon with a twist of kiwi, jasmine infused with mimosa. A patient can grab a hot slice of bread on the way out.

Talia Medina, who started coming to Dotson's office about a month ago, said she now feels more at ease about having dental problems fixed.

"Nobody likes coming to the dentist, but this makes it so much easier," Medina said, a heated massage pad kneading her back as she waited for a crown. "I watch TV, it smells nice, it just makes it really easy. A lot better than a regular dentist."

'Warm fuzzies'

Paul Landman, a dentist at the Manus Northwestern Oral Health Center on North Michigan Avenue, said his practice has evolved into a spa dentistry operation. He started out with CD players and free coffee but now offers hand and foot massages, fragrant heated towels and other "warm fuzzies."

"Some patients are like, 'Leave me alone, I don't want any of this stuff,'" Landman said. "Some say, 'Pamper me, pamper me, pamper me.' I have one patient who calls up and says she wants a fried-egg sandwich, tea and a lot of newspapers to distract her. So we give her what she wants."

Landman said that unless a patient requests an unreasona-

ble amenity, there is no charge for the additional services, including the fried-egg sandwich.

In Houston, Max Greenfield has created ImageMax Dental Day Spa, an ornate facility decked out with fountains and modern art that promotes a trip to the dentist as "a getaway."

Patients can change into a robe, sample eight different aromas of oxygen and meditate in a relaxation room decorated like a Japanese garden.

The actual dental area features lambskin leather chairs, hot aromatherapy towels and a procedure known as a "bubble jet gum massage" that uses air and water to clean teeth.

"It's like a touch-free car wash," explained Greenfield, who left dental school three years ago with visions of a salon-style dental practice.

ImageMax clients can package a tooth cleaning with a hot-stone massage or a detoxifying Adriatic algae and clay wrap.

And on the way out, everyone gets a milk chocolate business card—with the recommendation they brush after eating it.

Although spa dentistry may sound like oral care for the rich and famous, practitioners say they don't charge more than the average dentist. A basic cleaning at dental spas in Chicago and other cities costs about \$80, and that generally includes all the amenities except major massage treatments.

Dental anxiety

The ADA says spa dentistry meshes well with an industry-wide push to defeat the anxiety that keeps many from seeing a dentist. "We're working more and more on the person connected to those teeth," said Kimberly Harms, a dentist and ADA spokeswoman. "The more comfortable the person is, the better they'll care for their teeth and the more they'll get their dental problems taken care of."

According to a 2001 ADA survey, more than 20 percent of Americans had gone more than a year without a dental checkup.

Even before spa dentistry entered the scene, Harms said, most practices had already made changes to improve the patient's experience, offering headphones with soothing music, coffee in the waiting room or a television to take minds off discomfort.

Fulton, of the Chicago Dental Society, supports such efforts to relax patients but cautions that a fine line exists between perks and a careful practice.

"Certainly what we're doing in the mouth, in such a small, tiny area, we need a certain type of environment to work in," he said. "The patient can't move. You've got to be careful not to move them around or tickle their toes or anything."

Robinson said the University of Connecticut's Dental School wouldn't offer Spa 101 classes any time soon, though students are taught the benefits of putting patients in a friendly, relaxed environment.

He believes spa-style services should be kept separate from a dental operation.

"I'm in the health care business," Robinson said, "not the makeover business."