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From 'Oww!' to 'Aaah'

Spa-style dental offices offer massages, facials and manicures to take patients' minds off procedures.

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Like many dentists starting a practice, Dr. Amy Hampton carefully chose the decor for her office. She selected an Asian-influenced theme with gentle lighting and calming hues. She purchased the latest in dental equipment and cushy chairs. She banned dentist music from the speakers, choosing lilting Zen tunes instead.

Then she hired Darcy Woods, a massage therapist.

In an effort to reduce the anxiety typically associated with dental visits, Hampton has joined a small but growing number of dentists who incorporate spa amenities like massages or facials into their practices.

At Hampton's DentalSpa, patients enjoy scented paraffin wax treatments for their hands during cleanings. Woods steps in during breaks in the dental action to massage patients undergoing more extensive procedures.

"This is all about atmosphere," says Hampton, who opened her Northeastside office in November. "I wanted to minimize everything bad about the dentist."

On a recent visit, Angie Carroll soaked in the extras. She relished the warmth of the paraffin treatment, relaxed as Woods massaged her feet, and leaned back to watch the plasma television positioned above the chair.

The 30-year-old Castleton resident was amazed at how quickly the time flew.

"I didn't get worked up at all," she says. "This made you think about things other than everything the hygienist was doing when she was scraping my teeth."

An estimated 9 to 15 percent of the population suffers dental anxiety, a phobia that prevents people from visiting a dentist. Almost half of Americans see a dentist less often than they should.

So dentists have been striving to find ways to erase the negative images associated with their profession -- the glare of white lights, the bzzzz of the drill, the pain of the pick. Several years ago, some began adding touches like mood colors on the walls or aromatherapy candles to distract patients from the task at hand.

More recently, they've upped the ante, offering massages or facials as an inducement for those who would rather not be there.

Philip Cardamone, a Connecticut psychologist with a specialty in dental phobias, says he's not familiar with the spa concept. But anything that distracts patients can ease the fears associated with the dentist, he says.

"It's the meaning that people put on things that creates anxiety, so anything that helps a person change the meaning helps," he says. "There's going to be a lot of individual variation on what works for one person or another."

'Spa' meaning debated

There's also a fair amount of individual variation in what does and does not constitute a dental spa, says John Chien, co-founder of the recently established International Dental Spa Association, based in Pacific Palisades, Calif.

Thousands of dentists splash subdued colors on their walls and light candles to enhance their offices, he says. But a true dental spa incorporates spa treatments as well, such as massage therapy or another relaxation technique.

"There's a debate right now, going on within the dental community, 'I'm a dental spa; I offer a massage pad and aromatherapy candle,' " Chien says. "What we want to do is say you've got to take the word spa pretty seriously. You have to have some sort of spa treatment that's part of complementary alternative medicine."

A survey conducted last year by the American Dental Association found that while many dentists offer perks like headphones or warm towels to their patients, 5 percent now feature massages, facials or manicures.

From the dentists' standpoint, it's all about the patients.

"It's really about making that individual feel more comfortable, about associating going to the dentist with things that are comfortable," says Dr. Kimberly Harms, a consumer adviser for the American Dental Association and a dentist in Farmington, Minn.

Hampton sees these extras as improving her own experience as well as those of her patients. One of the things she'd always hated about her job was encountering patients who were squeamish about office visits.

"Every day of dentistry, someone tells you, 'I don't want to be here,' and that makes you not want to be here. Think about it: Why would they want to be here?" she says.

Dental spas may have the answer. They're there not just for the owwwws of the dental work but also for the aaahs of the spa treatments.

There are plenty of aaahs at Sonrisa, a periodontal spa in Downtown Indianapolis. It offers facials, eye treatment, hot stone therapy and massages, in addition to dental services. Eventually it may expand to include dermatologic procedures such as microdermabrasion or Botox shots, says dentist and owner Jeanette Holloway.

One-stop shopping

A patient can enjoy services like reflexology during a dental treatment, or can come in separately for the procedure. Regulars frequently drop by to enjoy a 15-minute massage or a mini-facial without ever opening wide, Holloway says. Parents of children having orthodontic work done can pop upstairs for a skin treatment.

"Baby boomers enjoy luxury and creature comforts and one-stop shopping," she says. "If you are a person who gets facials anyway, it's easy to get one when you come in to have your teeth cleaned."

Even people who do not normally have facials may test them out if they're having dental treatments at Sonrisa. Philip Seabrook, 51, had been a patient long before Sonrisa became a spa. When the practice converted, Seabrook at first thought it would have little to offer him. After all, he figured, facials are mostly for women.

He's a believer

But then he tried one.

Now, the IUPUI employee is a fan. He's even visited the spa on days when he's not having dental work done, just for a chair massage and facial.

Hampton's DentalSpa has chosen a different approach. All of the perks are included in her fees, and she has no plans to offer additional beauty services.

"I'm not here to be your full facial makeover. I'm here to be your dentist," she says.

But she's not your father's dentist. Her office has a decidedly modern feel. Everyone who works there wears a sleek black uniform, a far cry from the signature dental scrubs one usually encounters.

At the end of a procedure, patients are presented with a tray containing a milkshake, ibuprofen, a warm scented towel and lip balm. In one corner of the office, Hampton has set up a makeup counter for her patients to do touch-ups on their way out the door.

Patients don't wind up paying extra for these services; Hampton includes them all in her basic fee, which she says is comparable to those of area dentists.

The only downside Hampton has encountered thus far is how well the dental spa concept works. Patients linger much longer.

"The biggest obstacle has been that we've had to lengthen our time of new patient visits because people are so intrigued. They don't feel rushed," she says. "Actually, this is a couple of minutes of serenity for a lot of people."

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavskyat (317) 444-6354.

Who to see: If adding spa services to your dental appointment will make your smile that much wider, you can contact:

DentalSpa, 52 52 E. 82nd St., Suite 203; (317) 578-9666, www.dentalspaindy.com.

Sonrisa, a periodontal spa, 508 Indiana Ave.; (317) 269-0401.

How to tell if you're phobic

Do you suffer dental phobia? If you answer yes to some of these questions, you might.

- * Do you feel so uneasy the night before a dental appointment that you wind up canceling it?
- * Do you get nervous in the waiting room of your dentist's office, or uneasy in the dentist's chair?
- * Did you have a past negative experience at the dentist's office?

* Do you think your dentist is unsympathetic?

* When the dentist or hygienist places objects in your mouth, do you panic and feel like you cannot breathe normally?

* Does the thought of having an injection make you feel physically ill or tense?

* Do you get anxious when you see a dentist or the instruments he or she uses?

* Are you worried the dentist will see your mouth as among the worst he or she has ever seen?

Dental Phobia Treatment Center, www.dentalfear.net

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