

Taking the bite out of dental care

CREATURE COMFORTS TO THE RESCUE

By Deb Robbins

Close your eyes for a moment and think of something relaxing. What comes to mind? Soft music ... the sound of ocean waves ... a therapeutic massage?

Chances are, whatever you envisioned doesn't involve the high-pitched buzz of dental drills, ultra-bright lights or novocaine.

Recent studies suggest more than one-fourth of American adults avoid going to the dentist because of fear of pain or a previous bad experience. Some dentists estimate the actual number is closer to one-half of all adults.

More and more, dental professionals are doing something about the problem.

An American Dental Association poll of 427 U.S. dentists in 2004 found that about half offered some type of comfort services, such as headphones, neck rests, warm towels and free snacks. A smaller percentage of dental offices offered more spa-like amenities, such as massages, facials and manicures.

Luckily for patients in the Chicago Southland, evidence shows the trend toward more patient-friendly dental environments has caught on locally.

In Orland Park, patients entering Dr. Richard Pape's office find themselves immediately at ease, thanks to furnishings that could be mistaken for a luxury spa.

"We remodeled our office about two-and-a-half years ago," the 25-year veteran dentist says. "We have many patients who tell us they feel like they're coming to the 'dental spa.'"

And with good reason. The office is decorated in peaceful earth tones with dramatic lighting, striking artwork and comfortable, contemporary furnishings. The soothing strains of spa-like music play on the office's satellite radio, and complimentary beverages and

light snacks offer delicious distractions in the waiting area. Coffee bar, anyone?

"I wanted a nice, relaxed atmosphere that would put my patients at ease," Pape says.

Once patients venture past the waiting area, the office's four exam rooms offer special touches of their own, with features resembling a nice home-theater system. DVD players and CD players with headphones are available, with flat-screen TVs mounted on the ceiling.

Creature-comfort amenities include blankets and neck pillows; protective, tinted eyeglasses to shield the eyes from bright dental lights; and warm towels to refresh patients when their visit is complete. Children can choose a toy from the office's treasure chest at the end of their visit.

For patients who require significant dental work, nitrous oxide (also known as laughing gas) offers added relaxation.

And all first-time patients meet with Pape first in his consultation room, away from the treatment area. "I start out by asking them, 'What can we do to make your experience better here?' Our goal is to offer very individualized dental care for our patients," he says.

Animated patient education software helps explain a variety of dental procedures in detail, heightening a patient's understanding and alleviating fear of the unknown.

Dr. Peter Pullara Jr., who runs Plainfield Family Dental Center in Plainfield and Pullara Family Dental Center in Coal City, has created a dental practice in which a friendly, reassuring professional staff and entertaining distractions for children and adults alike make for a positive, enjoyable experience.

What kid wouldn't want to go to the dentist when there are Xbox 360 and hand-held



Dentists increasingly use music, videos and pillows to soften the discomfort of dental visits. The Orland Park office of Dr. Richard Pape (facing page) sets a cheerful mood with photos of smiling patients.



Photos by Brett Roseman

Nintendo DS games for their personal use in the waiting room? Younger children not yet into electronics can choose from a mountain of other playthings, games and books. And all kids can pick their very own toy from a treasure chest when the dental visit is over.

Pullara's adult patients enjoy the comfortably furnished waiting areas and exam rooms, where light classical music plays overhead and charming artwork covers the walls. In his Coal City office, wall-mounted TVs in each exam room offer added distraction. And there's no need for headphones with these TVs; all exam rooms are completely private and enclosed.

Patients are encouraged to bring their own MP3 players or iPods for added comfort, and there's never a reason to squint from the glare of bright lights. Pullara offers tinted sunglasses to shield sensitive eyes; kids love to keep theirs.

Patients who cringe at the sound of a dental drill are relieved to discover that Pullara uses "air abrasion," a drill-less technology that

generates little or no heat, sound, pressure or vibration. Relatively simple and quick, air abrasion works like a mini sandblaster, using a fine stream of silica, aluminum oxide or a baking soda mixture to blast away tooth decay. The procedure is ideal for use in children and others who are fearful and who have minimal tooth decay.

Like Pape, Pullara offers nitrous oxide sedation and much-appreciated topical analgesic to numb the gum for a virtually pain-free novocaine injection.

Pullara also offers oral sedation medications like Valium and Xanax, when appropriate, to calm patients with more severe dental fears and anxiety. Prescribed in advance and taken an hour or so before the dental appointment, these medications help "take the edge off." Because of the drugs' sedative effects, a designated driver should accompany patients to the office.

"Our goal is to create a very comfortable, assuring and relaxing experience for our patients," Pullara says. ■

DENTAL WORRIES? SOME SELF-PREPARATION CAN HELP

- Avoid caffeine for at least six hours before a dental appointment because caffeine tends to magnify a feeling of nervousness and the "jitters."
- An hour or so before your dental visit, eat high-protein foods such as cheese, which has a calming effect.
- Breathe regularly and slowly. People who are anxious tend to hold their breath, which decreases oxygen levels and further increases the feeling of panic.
- Agree upon a specific gesture with your dentist beforehand, such as a hand signal, so that you may alert him/her to pause during his work.
- If you are looking for a dentist, ask friends and relatives for recommendations.
- Interview a prospective dentist.

— Deb Robbins with sources from the
Academy of General Dentistry