

Massage, Aromatherapy, Oils and a Root Canal

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Correction Appended

YOU don't usually see people smiling in the dentist's chair, but the woman at the Madison Avenue office of Dr. Paul Tanners looked, well, happy. The dentist had just completed the last of a full reconstruction on her upper and lower teeth, and the patient was enjoying a foot rub from the massage therapist on his staff.

In a city where healthy competition is a given in most professions, some dental practices are now offering previously unheard-of services and other perks, from massages to DVD screenings, as a way to build up business.

"There are currently more dentists in Manhattan than there are in 40 other states," said Robert Raibur, president of the New York County Dental Society, which counts 2,500 members. Yet demand for their services, especially cosmetic treatments like tooth whitening, bonding and dental implants, has softened in the bumpy economy of the last couple of years, according to Leslie Seldin, a consumer advisory spokeswoman for the American Dental Association.

What to do? According to Mr. Raibur, an increasing number of Manhattan dentists are providing additional services, like digital photography to show patients how they will look after cosmetic improvements. And some practitioners are doing more than that.

Two years ago, Jay Neuhaus decided to give his 25-year-old practice, Gramercy Dental Arts on Park Avenue South, a nudge by hiring Laura Norman, a foot reflexologist, and two members of her staff, who are at his office two days a week to give foot massages to patients who want them.

About half of Dr. Neuhaus's patients opt for the free massages, which take place during treatment and include aromatherapy, with fragrant essential oils like lavender, citrus and mint rubbed onto bare feet.

"People come in nervous, even about having their teeth cleaned," says Ms. Norman, who also has a private practice on Park Avenue. "This is a great way to reduce their stress. I've had patients tell me they sleep much better after having reflexology that day."

While having their foot rub, patients can also dip their hands in a skin-smoothing warm paraffin bath that Dr. Neuhaus provides. And the dental chair itself has built-in rolling massagers for the back and legs, so that even when Ms. Norman or her assistants aren't there, patients can use a control panel to get a mechanical rubdown.

Also on hand: a video collection for patients who want a film as background while undergoing lengthy procedures, a selection of teas and cookies baked on the premises each morning. "As you approach the office, it smells like a bakery," Dr. Neuhaus boasted. "So instead of being anxious and afraid about seeing the dentist, people walk in smiling and feeling good."

As word spread of the massages and cookies, business boomed. "It's the 'wow!' factor," he said. "About 99 percent of new patients come to us through referrals, rather than advertising."

At Marvin Fiedler's office on East 86th Street, technology reigns. Each treatment room has a flat-screen TV attached to the dental chair. There is a wireless mouse that patients can use to channel surf or even go on the Internet (wireless keyboards are available for those who want to cruise the Web or check their e-mail).

"People like to see updated modern technology," said Dr. Fiedler, whose office also offers digital X-rays ("90 percent less radiation than the regular kind," he avers) that patients can see on the flat screen and print out. Special software allows for color photo enlargements that show every cavity in vivid detail.

For 23 years, Dr. Fiedler practiced dentistry in a traditional office, on 96th Street. When he made the move 10 blocks south last June, he had the office decorated in soft lavenders and grays "designed to soothe," he said, and had the digital systems installed.

"It's made a world of difference," he said. "At the previous office, we had fewer than 500 patients. Now there are close to 700, and that number is growing. Every week we get seven or more new patients. People hear about us, and they're intrigued."

Dr. Tanners, who specializes in reconstructive dentistry, says he has given his 35-year practice a boost by bringing in not only a massage therapist, but a plastic surgeon as well.

The surgeon, Michelle Zweifler, who joined the staff last year, divides her time among Dr. Tanners's practice, hospital work and her own private practice in Manhattan. Dr. Tanners's patients are informed by mailings that Dr. Zweifler is in the office on Tuesdays and Thursdays to offer free consultations.

For a fee, Dr. Zweifler also performs simple, noninvasive procedures in the office, usually injections of Botox (which reduces facial wrinkles by temporarily paralyzing underlying muscles) or collagen (which fills in facial creases). As many as eight patients a week opt for one of these

treatments. Those who want cosmetic surgery need to book an appointment with Dr. Zweifler at her Upper East Side office.

Why a plastic surgeon? "Patients used to complain to me about their wrinkles," Dr. Tanners said. "Once people's mouths were fixed, they became more aware of other imperfections, and they wanted to look better."

He recounts the case of a patient who came in one morning with a cracked front tooth from a fall she had had the previous night. After Dr. Tanners made her a temporary crown, Dr. Zweifler examined her swollen nose to see if there was any fracture.

Another patient, concerned about her "gummy smile," has booked an appointment with Dr. Zweifler to have her upper lip surgically lowered.

Dr. Tanners's massage therapist, who goes by the name Izamar, joined the practice two years ago, and "the response has been phenomenal," Dr. Tanners said. About 80 percent of his patients opt for the free hand, foot and calf massages she offers.

"It's so relaxing that some patients don't even want nitrous," he said. "I've seen patients fall asleep during treatment."

Correction: July 31, 2002, Wednesday An article in the Job Market section on July 21 about dental practices that offer services like massages and DVD screenings to build up business misspelled the surname of the president of the New York County Dental Society, who commented on the trend. He is Dr. Robert Raiber, not Raibur.

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