

Filling gaps in business

Lake Oswego offices offer massage chairs, heated towels and town car pickup as cavity-filling declines

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LAKE OSWEGO —

Sometimes Sue Wendling will be excavating a tooth, drill whining like a horde of angry mosquitoes, when her patient abruptly starts twitching, then explodes with laughter. Not because of nitrous oxide, but because of the scene playing behind the patient's virtual reality glasses, on a miniature movie screen that helps put the drill out of sight and mind.

Comedy is the biggest genre in Wendling's 100-title video library — most requested is Chris Farley's "Tommy Boy" — which is one of many amenities at her 1,000-patient cosmetic dentistry practice.

Since 1997, the practice has been in an Oswego Pointe office with an expansive view of the Willamette River. Her Web site promises boat-gazing from the operator, a Brookstone massage chair, heated neck pillows and blankets, lavender-scented towels, paraffin hand dips, digital before-and-after smile portraits and door-to-door town car service.

"I get a lot of my ideas from day spas," says Wendling, a West Linn resident who teaches cosmetic dentistry at the Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies. "I'm dental-phobic myself, so I'm always looking for things that I can use."



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Sue Wendling is among several area dentists who promise patients such as Trini Robleto of Hillsboro an environment more like a spa and less like an office. At an appointment last week, Robleto watches a movie while she wears moisturizing paraffin gloves.

"It's also how I promote my practice," she says. "Most of my patients come to me by referral. They go back to work and say, 'You're not going to believe this,' and talk about the experience of having a warm pillow put at the base of their neck. . . . We've created a culture."

It's an elite culture that's being replicated across the nation. The June issue of Dental Practice Report, a trade journal that focuses on the business side of dentistry, carried a six-page cover story, "Dental Spas: Fad, Niche or Emerging Trend?"

According to the article, the practice of luring patients with an elaborate array of creature comforts has blossomed, especially in the past six months. It's being driven largely by cosmetic dentists attempting to build practices in a down economy and to differentiate themselves from the competition — not only other dentists but also do-it-yourself kits for teeth whitening, one of the most common cosmetic procedures.

Meanwhile, the Madison, Wis.-based American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry offered a panel discussion on "Spa Dentistry" at its annual conference last spring.

According to Eric Nelson, a spokesman for the academy, its membership has expanded in recent years as more general-practice dentists offer cosmetic procedures. Many are trying to supplement a dearth in revenues from once-common maladies like cavities, which have become increasingly rare and need to be re-filled less often because fillings have become more durable.

Although a fraction of the academy's 5,500 members have incorporated spa-like amenities into their practices, Nelson says the trend is catching on, especially as the re-

cession lingers.

"The days of drill-and-fill dentistry are over," says Nelson. "Our dentists aren't just competing with each other; they're competing with all the elective things people do in their lives. Right now, people are stuck between, 'Do I want a new car, a trip to Paris or a smile makeover?' A full mouth of veneers can cost as much as \$20,000."

Nelson's not kidding. Wendling charges \$1,200 a tooth for veneers. For a full-mouth whitening, she charges \$460 to \$900, and for a full-mouth restoration, the bill is between \$36,000 and \$40,000.

At The Art of Smile Making in Lake Oswego, a cosmetic dentistry practice owned by academy member Steve Lind, the chair — which at the flick of switch offers a full-body massage — is rarely empty. Lind supplements his services with virtual reality goggles, surround-sound headphones, and heated towels and blankets. He orders doughnuts for his morning patients and pours wine for his afternoon patients.

And at Paramount Dental Care in West Linn, which opened in

Cascade Summit in October, Grant Smith offers freshly baked bread and cookies. Gardenia-scented aromatherapy candles burn in the waiting room, which, with its overstuffed chairs and couches, looks more like someone's living room.

More candles burn in the operatories, where the lights are dim and patients listen to James Taylor on Bose headphones or watch "Happy Gilmore" and "Forrest Gump" on ceiling-mounted flat panel displays. Even the sound of the drill is missing because Smith has switched to an air abrasion tool that works like a miniature sandblaster, eliminating the whine and the need for Novocaine. All is quiet except for the occasional guffaw.

"Without a doubt, this is increasing our client base," says Smith, a Lake Oswego resident who's already invested \$500,000 in his new office and is planning to add a full-time masseuse.

"To have a patient laugh during a root canal is a really neat experience."



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