



Say Ahhhh! at the Dental Spa

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NEW YORK — As the calming sound of a fountain trickles in the background and a masseuse rubs your feet, the drilling in your mouth is hardly a bother.

At least that's what dentists who have turned their offices into mini day spas hope.

In an effort to make a trip to the tooth doctor less terrifying, some dental offices now offer an array of perks like massages, reflexology and movies.

"In the last 20 years, dentists have been focusing more and more on the needs of the patients attached to the teeth," said American Dental Association spokeswoman, Dr. Kimberly Harms.

At the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry, a massage therapist loosens up patients with complimentary treatments as they sit in a high-tech "Zen chair."

"Patients put on headphones and can feel the music through the vibrating chair," said Dr. Debra Gray King, a dentist at the center. "It puts you into a deep relaxation state."

And once a patient's smile is sparkling, the masseuse is available for a full-body massage in the office's spa.

Relaxed patients are also a plus for dentists, who can work in a safer manner when their clients are calm, King said.

"There is more risk of injury like nicking [a patient's] tongue if they are jumping around and tense," she said. "This helps them relax and not think, 'OK, there's somebody drilling in my mouth.'"

One of King's clients who used to dread the dentist said she now looks forward to going.

"I feel like I'm doing something pleasurable for myself when I go," said Martha Dickey, 47. "It's really exhilarating to walk into a high-style spa/dentist office."

The trend of combining traditional medical procedures with pampering perks has been on the rise in the last few years, according to the International SPA Association. There were 2.8 million visits made to medical spas in 2001, and the niche grew 143 percent between 1997 and 2002.

"There are medical spas in hospitals, in health clubs, in resort/hotel settings," Debra Locker of the SPA Association said in an e-mail. "Dental spas are something new that we are seeing in the medical spa realm."

And it's not just big cities that are offering these chic touches. At Dr. Harms' office in Farmington, Minn., the waiting room has a juice bar and video/music library from which patients choose entertainment to enjoy while getting the plaque scrapped off their teeth.

"Patients might pick out a feature film for a root canal," said Harms. "We have shorter comedy picks which keep them entertained even if it's just a cleaning appointment."

But Dr. Leslie W. Seldin, a dentist in New York City, said he's not participating in this "one-stop shopping for health care" trend.

"Are people now going to go to a dermatologist and say, 'I wish I could get my teeth cleaned here?'" he asked. "When people come to my office they come for dental care, and if they want a foot massage or Botox they should go to the places that provide them."

Seldin attributed the spa dentistry trend to an increasingly competitive field. And according to Dickey, the extra pampering at places like King's office can be especially appealing to those who cower from even a simple cleaning.

"My sister has genuine dread and fear [of the dentist]. She has gotten up and walked out of a dentist's office during a procedure," said Dickey. "I'm going to take her here, I think it will really help her."

This week, the Chicago Dental Society will be the first major dental convention to offer a course on spa dentistry. The lecture, "A Comfortable Practice for Your Patients and Team," will be held during the Midwinter Meeting, a convention with more than 33,000 attendees, according to the CDS.

No matter how qualified a dentist is, Dickey feels that making an appointment at an office without the perks is now out of the question for her.

"When you go to a regular dental office there is pain and unpleasant noises, and you have a high level of anxiety because you've had to brace yourself the whole time," she said. "I don't want to go back to that place."