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# Dental Practice

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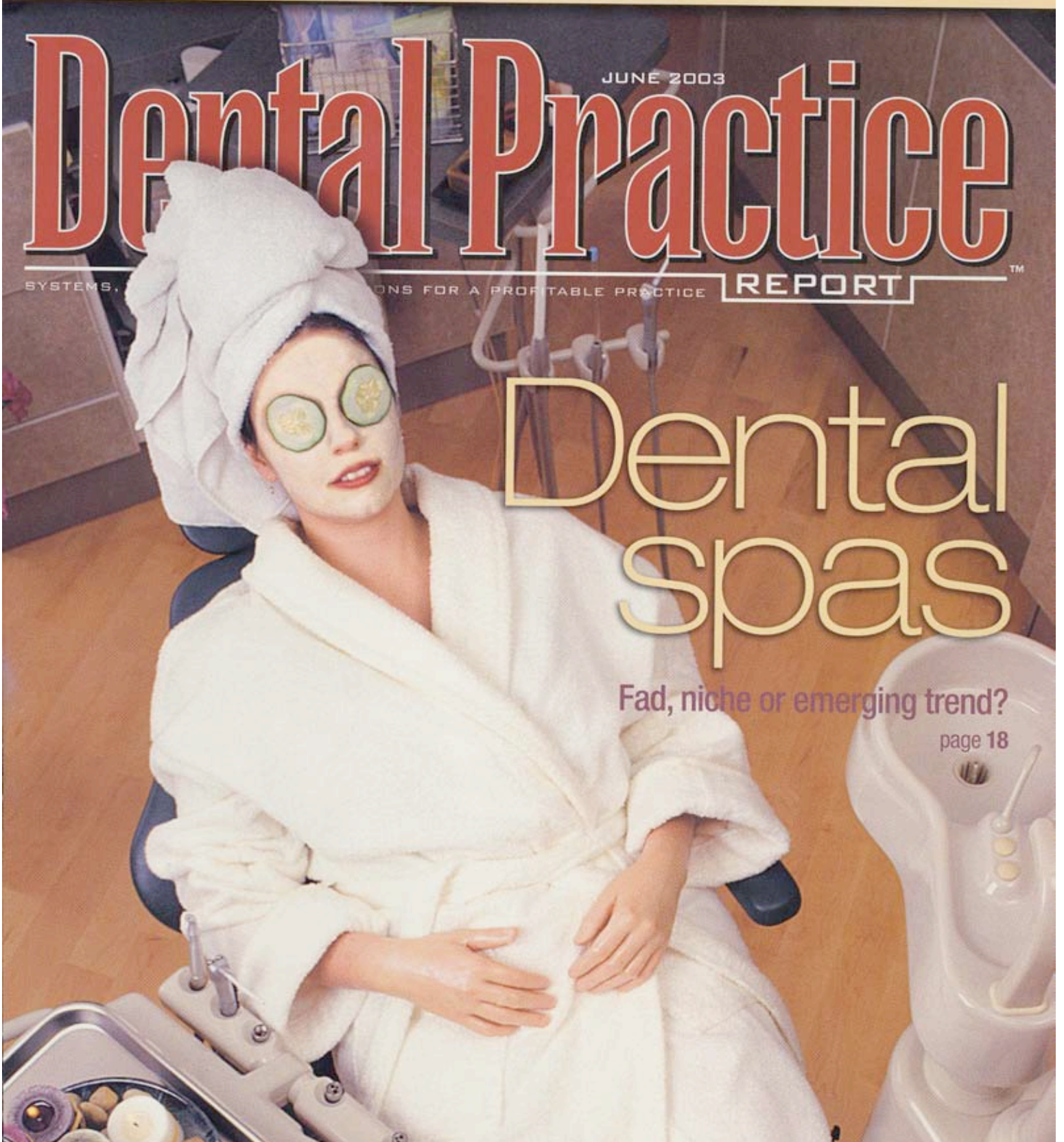
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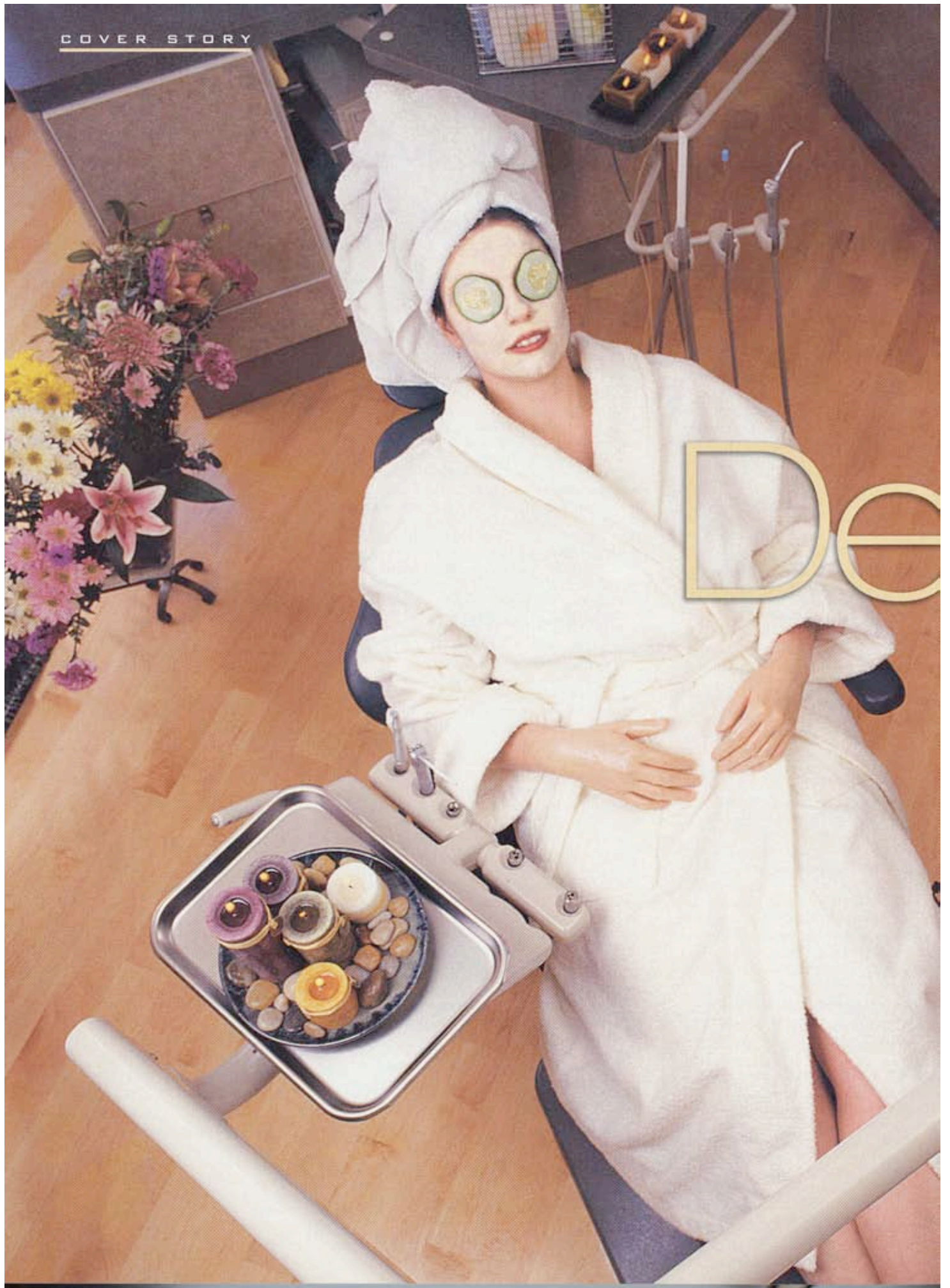
## Dental spas

Fad, niche or emerging trend?

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Dentists discuss the ethics and future of the pampering amenities found in a growing number of dental offices across the country.

BY KIM STEELE

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While dentists at **Perfect Teeth Dental Spa** in Chicago don't actually place cucumbers on patients' eyes, they do offer a host of relaxing spa amenities, such as massage chairs and paraffin wax hand treatments.

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**D**ental Zen chairs. Back and shoulder massages. Virtual-reality glasses. Botox injections. Aromatherapy. Cool herbal eye masks. Rock thermotherapy. Paraffin hand wax treatments. Lemon-scented hot towels. Complimentary limousine rides. Pet-sitting services. Oxygen breathing bar sessions. Microdermabrasion. Shiatsu.

The list of spa-like amenities popping up in dental offices nationwide is growing, and no one has noticed like the mainstream press. There's *Time* magazine's "Root canals are better with a foot massage," *The Wall Street Journal's* "Massaging more than your gums," *American Spa* magazine's "Open wide and say spa," and Fox News Channel's "Say ahhhh! at the dental spa." Magazines, newspapers and television are calling dental spas the newest trend in dentistry.

# spas

Fad, niche or emerging trend?

## The new face of esthetics

But are they? Definitely, says Eric Nelson, public relations director for the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, which represents 5,271 cosmetic dentists. Nelson says the trend is so hot, the AACD offered a panel discussion on dental spas—a first—at the annual conference in May. Nelson says the organization designs its conferences around the latest techniques and developments in the field, and spa dentistry is a large part of what it calls the new face of esthetics.

Nelson says dental spas are mostly prevalent in cosmetic dentistry, and the new type of practice really started booming in the last six months to a year. "I knew it was starting to get hot when *The Wall Street Journal* called me for a story about a dental spa in New York City," he says. "That turned into a big article on the health page, which I e-mailed to our members. The next thing I knew, I was getting calls from dentists wanting more information."

Dr. David Fulton Jr., spokesman for the Chicago Dental Society, agrees that dental spas are booming. In response to their growing popularity, the CDS offered its first course on the practice at the Chicago Midwinter Show in February. Fulton says the CDS supports a dentist's decision to provide spa services, as long as the doctor's first priority is to provide high-quality dental care in a safe and comfortable environment.

"We have seen that there is a trend," Fulton says. "Actually, I would call it a niche that has increased in size over time. It's not a niche that is going to



become the norm in dentistry, but it's certainly a niche that has grown and gained some notoriety over the past couple of years. I don't think it will become the norm because patients still want to seek traditional in-and-out, painless-as-possible dentistry."

Dr. Leslie Seldin, a spokesman for the American Dental Association and a dentist from New York City, says the ADA has no official position on dental spas. As long as dentists comport themselves ethically, morally and legally in the practice of dentistry, he says, then they are within their rights to offer dental spa amenities.

But speaking personally, Seldin says he doesn't believe dental spas will be a long-lasting trend because he has witnessed similar situations. For instance, dentists went through a period where patients wanted artwork painted on their teeth. Now, they get few requests for it. That, says Seldin, is a fad.

"This is something that has taken hold in the last two years," Seldin says. "Will it grow so the norm is that dentists will be providing multi-faceted environments? I would doubt that in the long-term the majority of dentists would be doing that. Right now, dental spas are in heavily

populated urban centers, but they haven't bled out into the middle of the country. My gut tells me they're going to continue to be centered where they are, but that's a personal opinion."

## The relaxation factor

Obviously, some patients enjoy the practices, many of which have luxurious reception areas. Once inside the operatory, patients are treated to a variety of pampering amenities. Proponents of dental spas say the atmosphere helps patients relax before their appointments.

The Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry is located in a new 8,400-square-foot two-story, southern-style mansion in Atlanta. At the base of the staircase and wrought-iron railings lies a plush rug with the practice's logo. The space opens out to reveal an upscale lounge with a refreshment center, fireplace, broadband Inter-

net stations, mahogany-colored hardwood floors and luxurious upholstery and tapestries. Patients can view the mansion's outdoor garden and fountains through large picture windows in the 11 patient cosmetic suites.

Dan King, ACCD's chief operating officer, says he and his wife, Dr. Debra Gray King, believe the definition of a dental spa is incorporating spa-like amenities into the practice to make the dental experience more pampering and pleasant. Their amenities include massages, herbal eye masks, rock thermotherapy, flat-panel TV/DVD/Web monitors in each operatory, mineral hand-scrub manicures and paraffin hand-wax treatments, massaging revitalization chairs, aromatherapy, lemon-scented hot towels, virtual reality glasses, and roses and wine at the end of each smile design. The ACCD also employs a full-time massage therapist who is certified in temporomandibular joint massage.

"I can't speak for all dental spas, because they vary somewhat from practice to practice," Dan King says. "And some may or may not work, depending on the underlying dental practice in the first place. You can't take a practice that has all sorts of clinical deficiencies, customer-service problems and other defects, add some spa-like amenities and expect them to be the magic wand that transforms it into something it's not. But if you have your beans together with respect to the clinical and customer-service side, they're a wonderful icing on the cake that can take your practice to the next level."

Autographed photos of celebrities line the walls of Dr. Grace Sun's dental spa in West Hollywood, Calif. The office, located minutes from all the major film studios, provides easy access to the stars she treats, such as Sylvester Stallone, Sheryl Crow, Jean-Claude Van Dam and Donna Summer. Sun's trendy office, decorated in soothing neutral colors, features tapestries, plants and a glass-block divider. Amenities include massage chairs, Shiatsu, protein drinks, fruit smoothies and an extensive calming herbal tea menu, order-in food services, restaurant reservations, oxygen treatments, pet- and baby-sitting, answering patients' cell phones, virtual movies and massages.

"I don't know how the term 'dental spa' came about, but I do things that I think are right," Sun says, noting she employs a masseuse one day a week. "I believe the concept is to make the whole dental experience more pleasant. My main thing is knowing they come to visit the office because they need some dentistry. So the dentistry has to be quality. That's very important, because that's what is going to last. But it's also the experience. You provide a pleasant experience and they go home



A patient at the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry in Atlanta, Ga., receives a relaxing massage as she waits for her dental appointment.



with high-quality dentistry. That was my whole concept as a service business and being proud of what I do."

Imagemax Dental Day Spa is nestled between a hair and nail salon in an upscale Houston neighborhood. The ornate spa, owned by Dr. Max Greenfield and built about a year ago, is equipped with modern art, marble pillars and tiles, mirrors, glass-block dividers, aromatic candle arrangements, a wall-mounted fish tank, plants and built-in nooks for an array of statues. Greenfield employs a nurse and facialist for some treatments, and contracts with an outside service for hot stone therapy.

Amenities include Botox parties, laser therapy for spider veins, photo facials, aromatherapy neck wraps, laser hair reduction, microdermabrasion, paraffin hand wax treatments, an oxygen breathing bar with flavored air, aromatherapy foot spa baths, refreshments, light chemical peels, customized masks, DNA cryostem therapy, a Japanese Zen garden with palm trees and waterfalls, and lambskin dental chairs. Also, he offers four packages for patients who want to spend the day at a dental spa.

"I think spa amenities are a trend," Greenfield says. "But combining the facial treatments with them is something I created for my practice. I don't know if other dental offices combine the face with the teeth. And I don't know if that's a trend. Spa dentistry has caught on with people who are into their looks, so it will probably stay with the cosmetic or boutique dental practices rather than become standard with all offices."

## Making the move to amenities

Sun and Greenfield say they incorporated spa-like amenities in their practices when they began. Sun says she always wanted to be a cosmetic dentist, but when she opened her office 20 years ago, they weren't as popular as they are now. She decided to carve her own niche by treating patients special—she says they get quality dentistry while a helpful, friendly and caring staff attends to their needs. Besides, catering to the entertainment business means you have to talk the language and treat stars like they're used to being treated, she adds.

"It wasn't intentional," Sun says. "It's not like they come in for spa dentistry. I think they come in for the dentistry, period. But we do a little concierge service for patients, and I think people just remember that the whole experience is very pleasant and my office is a great place to visit. I've been doing this for 20 years, so it's not new for me. My concept is that I want to treat this person right. I think the spa experience is giving a person the attention they need. And I think it's a good thing that the patient gets more attention from his health care

# Taking the plunge

Dentist encourages others to experiment with spa amenities.

BY KIM STEELE

**H**ow would a dentist decide whether to add spa amenities?

Dr. Dennis Wells says the decision must be based on each practice's philosophy. Wells, a cosmetic dentist in Brentwood, Tenn., and one of the panelists discussing dental spas at the recent American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry's annual meeting, says he believes many dentists will quickly realize their patient base and practice philosophy are congruent with pampering and extra services.

"Overall, my advice would be 'go for it,'" Wells says. "Really indulge in this and see if you don't get the overwhelmingly positive reaction our practice has received. I think that too many times, dentists are guilty of being timid about changing the face of dentistry. We've all been conditioned from our training at dental school to stay in the pack. Even some of our state laws want to make us conform to where we all look just alike. I would encourage dentists to be more entrepreneurial in their thinking and branch out into these innocent, simple and rewarding things."

### Wells says dentists considering a dental spa should:


- be located in an area where disposable income is significant,
- visit a practice where spa amenities are used,
- find a mentor to assist with the transformation,
- attend courses or seminars on dental spas by practice management consultants,
- create a master game plan for incorporating spa amenities,
- introduce amenities slowly, gauging patients' response.

He recommends dentists incorporate a few amenities at first, such as paraffin hand waxes, aromatherapy candles and warm, scented towels. Then, consider adding special cushions to the chairs or entertainment systems in each operatory. For dentists who want more, there's reflexology and massage therapy.

Wells says there are three types of dental spas—pampering, which offer paraffin hand waxes and aromatherapy; therapeutic, providing massages, facials and manicures; and medical, with Botox, laser therapy and microdermabrasion. He says dentists must be sure to determine which type of dental spa they want and clearly draw the line so they aren't overwhelmed by management and overhead problems.







“When people leave here, they say it was the best dental visit and cleaning they’ve ever had.”

—Dr. Max Greenfield, Imagemax Dental Day Spa

provider. So I’m happy to see that happen.”

Greenfield says he got the idea for a dental spa when his office was under construction in 2001, and when it opened, he immediately began offering body scrubs and body wraps. But because his office wasn’t built with private changing rooms, he quickly cut those services out. In the beginning when he had few patients, Greenfield says, he encouraged them to come in strictly for the spa amenities. Now, as his practice has grown, he sees it becoming more of a dental office that has spa amenities rather than a spa that happens to do dentistry.

“Now, it’s more like they come in for dentistry and are introduced to the other things while they’re here,” Greenfield says. “We still get patients just for the facial and Botox parties, but what I like is when they come here for dentistry and leave saying, ‘That was neat! I came here for my teeth and got everything else done!’ Spa dentistry is just a different way of presenting dentistry. If you decorate it like a spa and have amenities that people like, they’re more likely to comply and come in. When people leave here, they say it was the best dental visit and cleaning they’ve ever had.”

King says their office had amenities such as massage chairs since the practice started, but began thinking about spa dentistry in earnest in 1994. They built on it, and got good feedback and requests for more amenities. To this day, they still get them. King says the trick is determining useful amenities from those that will cost undue time, energy and effort to implement and maintain. King says they are proactive about adding new amenities, but careful, too.

“Cosmetic dentistry is a want-based business and set of procedures instead of need-based, and this whole profession is transforming because there aren’t as many situations where people have bombed-out mouths,” King says. “You still see them, but with the advent of fluoridated water and a more enlightened, educated population about flossing and brushing, it’s not as prevalent. The problem was we were a want-based business, but no one wants to go to the dentist. So what businesses do people want to patronize? Well, no one was ever

forced to go to a spa or an upscale hotel. You start looking at products and services people buy because they want to, and that’s how the dental profession must transform itself. It has to mimic these want-based businesses.”

### Competing for patients’ business

The ADA’s Seldin agrees it’s a matter of public relations, saying he believes spa dentistry is one way dentists are now marketing their practices. So does the AACD’s Nelson, who notes he knows of another dentist in Atlanta who is starting to add spa amenities in an attempt to keep up with King.

“It’s a competitive field right now, and the crux of the matter is that cosmetic dentistry is still an elective procedure,” Nelson says. “A lot of insurance companies won’t cover that, and the procedures aren’t cheap. So dentists are competing for patients’ discretionary income. A full-mouth veneer might cost \$20,000, so if you’re going to spend that much, or \$8,000 on new crowns and a power whitening treatment and Invisalign, aren’t you going to look for the dentist who is providing the most bang for your buck?”

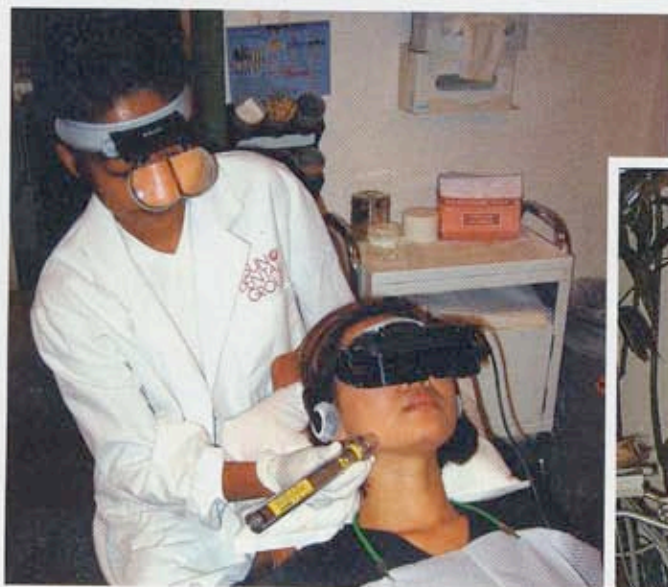
Greenfield says that each time his practice is featured on television, he gets numerous telephone calls from prospective patients. Greenfield says he markets as a dental spa because that’s what brings people in to his office. And those who are afraid of dentists tell him they’d never go anywhere else, he adds.

Greenfield and Sun can’t pinpoint how much their amenities increase their business, but King says their office has grown because of them. He says it has tripled in physical space and in the number of dentists practicing there. Also, the center has its own cosmetic dental lab, and has doubled the number of hygienists. He says it’s difficult to determine the cause of growth, but he believes part of it comes from the amenities because of the positive reaction they get from patients.

### Changing the status quo

Dental spas may be well received by patients, but how do other dentists react to the growing trend? Sun says





A patient enjoys virtual-reality glasses while receiving low-level laser therapy for pain (left), while another patient samples a variety of refreshments (right) at Dr. Grace Sun's dental practice in West Hollywood, Calif.



that while she discusses dental techniques with other dentists, she rarely talks about her practice's amenities. Greenfield says he gets numerous telephone calls from dentists after his practice is featured in the media, and he outlines his services, then invites them to visit for a personal tour. Sometimes, they take him up on his offer.

"They say it's really neat, and that they're considering changing their practice style," he says. "The only negative things I hear are from older, more traditional dentists who have been around a while and say they don't understand why we'd do skin care in a dental office. I tell them they can get everything done on their face at one place. They say, 'Oh, that's interesting.' Sometimes you can't teach old dogs new tricks."

King says he doesn't understand dentists who criticize dental spas or say their owners are trying to hide the fact they're a dentist. King says their office provides high-quality, complex cosmetic dentistry, but wanted to completely break the mold of a typical dental office. King makes no apology for the change.

"I don't know if the label 'dental spa' will be this enduring thing," King says. "Label aside, must the trend for making the dental experience a positive, pleasant and pampering experience continue? Yes. And the dentists who don't get it are those who think, 'Who cares if they get a little pain at the dentist's office. It's supposed to hurt.' That's a dinosaur mentality. It's not just how good you can prep a tooth. It's whether you can do it without making the patient go through the roof. It's making the whole experience a positive thing."

"We're doing stuff on the cutting edge, and whether it ends up being an interesting novelty that nobody else migrates to or becomes the standard in the dental office

in the year 2020, I do not know. But what I can say is the practices that deliver high-quality care and make it a pampering experience will be the ones people want to visit. It's almost amazing that dentists are as successful as they are, considering half the country doesn't go to a dentist and so many who do, dread it. If dentists shrug their shoulders and say, 'Get used to it,' then they're antiquated and wrong on both a humanistic and business level. Why think like that?"

The ADA's Seldin says he understands why some dentists jump on the spa bandwagon, but he also is quick to point out that spa dentistry isn't for every dentist—especially him. "I will tell you I'm a traditional general practitioner who has a traditional practice with traditional patients, and the last thing in the world I would do is change the way I practice," he says. "Other dentists believe their patients would be more comfortable with foot massages and aromatherapy, and there will be a segment of the population that will be attracted to it. So it's personal preference, and as long as no one is stepping over the bounds of legality and appropriate ethics, it's purely a personal choice." □

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