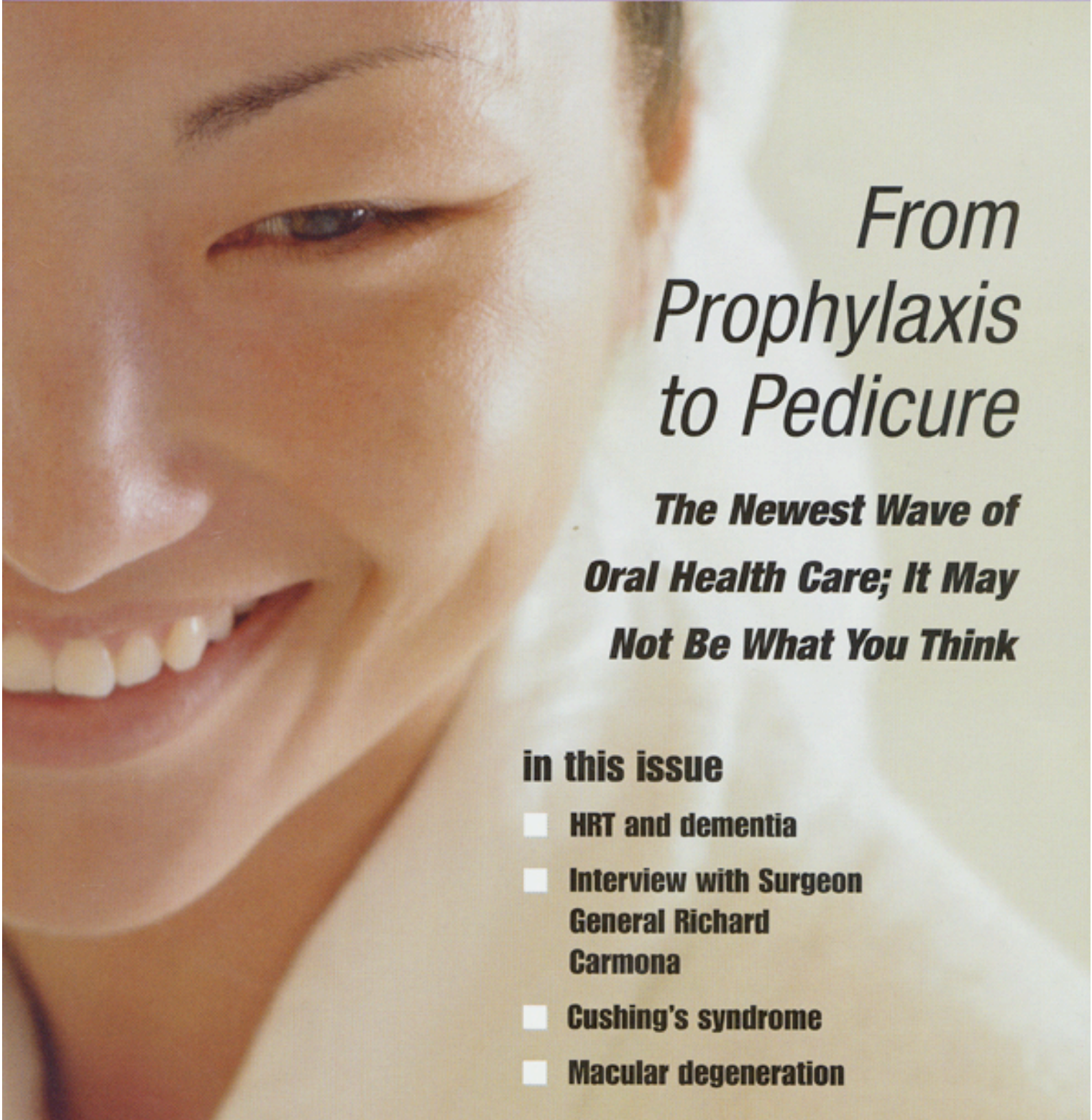


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A close-up, high-angle photograph of a woman's face, smiling warmly. Her eyes are slightly closed, and her teeth are visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white, suggesting a clinical or dental setting.

From Prophylaxis to Pedicure

***The Newest Wave of
Oral Health Care; It May
Not Be What You Think***

in this issue

- **HRT and dementia**
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General Richard
Carmona**
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The Advocators vs The Adversaries

Debbie Chapman, RDH, who works at the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry, is an enthusiastic supporter of spa dentistry. "It helps the compliance," she says. "It makes the patient actually excited about coming in [because] patients do not have to 'endure' dental treatment—we've taken it to another level. What we're doing is making the patient feel like they're at home with us, and that's where dentistry's going."

Opponents of spa dentistry, such as Annette Langdon, RDH, who has been a dental hygienist since 1994, is licensed in four states, and is currently working on her bachelor's degree in dental hygiene, say "the idea is just absurd." The concept, she maintains, "will completely undermine the [dental hygiene] profession."

Getting accepted into dental hygiene school and obtaining a license is very difficult, Langdon adds. And while she acknowledges that becoming a licensed masseuse or beautician also may be tough, she says dental hygiene is a whole other area. "Caring for people's relaxation and aesthetics is the job of the spa, and caring for people's health and dental care is the job for dentists and hygienists and nurses and doctors."

Be it wave of the future, absurdity, or both, the spa concept, after having been around for at least a couple of decades, is just recently catching on throughout the country. While there is no hard statistic on how many dental spas are operating in the United States, there is ample anecdotal evidence that the number is growing. Christian Yaste, DDS, who runs a spa-type practice with Joseph Hufanda, DDS, at the Ballantyne Center for Dentistry in Charlotte, North Carolina, says that when they opened their office just two years ago, the Charlotte Yellow Pages had no listings for dental spas. Now there are between half a dozen and a dozen listed, he says. "It's spreading like wildfire."

The presence and popularity of these practices "has been increasing during the last few years, as people become more accepting of massage and other forms of alternative therapy as mainstream," adds Judy Campbell Karpis, RDH, EdD, who teaches science in the Miami-Dade County public schools, practices dental hygiene during school vacations, and writes continuing education courses—including one on alternative therapies in the dental office.

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The Concept

While "dental spa" is something of a catch-all phrase, each of the practices that falls into this category has its own distinguishing characteristics. "There are a number of variations on the dental spa concept," says Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry's Debra Gray King, DDS, who was one of the professionals chosen to transform the participants in ABC's new reality TV series "Extreme Makeover."

"Some practices have morphed more into the plastic surgery or medical spa realm, with Botox, microdermabrasion, etc. being offered," she says. Other offices choose to offer more beautician-related services, such as pedicures or hair. "Our philosophy is to only [offer] services that make our core dental services more pleasant and pampering. We are not trying to create so much separate profit centers or get away from what we think our core competency is—cosmetic dentistry." King's practice has used this approach since 1992, she says, adding that it has evolved to include a full-time massage therapist and dental Zen chairs—which, according to Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry, send soundwaves through a patient's body to produce a relaxing effect.

Many dental offices offer aromatherapy, while others don't even realize that it is out there, Karpis says. There are the offices that give relaxation techniques to their patients or provide movies for them to watch to unwind, and then there are the more upscale dental offices that offer their clients warmed, herb-filled pillows and blankets.

The Originators

The factors that lead practitioners into spa dentistry are numerous. Yaste, for example, had a bad treatment experience while still a dental student. Following a bicycling accident, in which most of his front teeth were knocked out or broken, Yaste says he "spent most of the next day being fixed up at my dental school. Some of my own instructors really hurt me and did not seem concerned about how comfortable I was emotionally or physically. After

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"We are trying to convey at every dental appointment that dentistry is a health care issue. When we provide all of these luxuries and pampering, we are portraying that dental care is primarily for aesthetic purposes."

experiencing dentistry from the other side, I decided that I would try to make all of my patients as comfortable as possible, whatever it took."

He and Hufanda, acquaintances since high school who became roommates and close friends in dental school,

realized they had similar philosophies. After gaining experience elsewhere, they opened the Ballantyne Center for Dentistry, offering cosmetic and general dentistry plus sessions in a massage chair, massage attachments for the dental chairs, aromatherapy, and other services designed to improve patient comfort. They employ one dental hygienist, with plans to hire another soon, along with two dental assistants and two administrative employees who are cross-trained in each other's duties.

Lorin Berland, DDS, one of the pioneers of the spa dentistry concept, opened his Dallas Dental Spa 19 years ago. The idea came to him after getting a massage at a resort, which left him thinking "Boy, wouldn't it be great if I could offer this [at my office]?" Berland now has a practice that includes two massage therapists, both of whom are cross-trained as dental assistants and one of whom offers microdermabrasion services as well; four other dental assistants; two dental hygienists; two administrative employees; and another dentist. He has seen the dental spa concept spread widely during the time his has been in business. "I wish I had copyrighted that name," he says.

Fellow Texan Mark Sweeney, DDS, of the Austin Dental Spa, has been in practice since 1979, but in the spa business for just the past three years. His inspiration came from a neighbor in his office building, the owner of a computer company whose wife was a massage therapist looking for a job. Sweeney hired her, and, he recalls, "It wasn't two or three weeks before we realized we were on to something." His practice now employs three massage therapists, along with three dental hygienists and three dental assistants, and offers complimentary massages plus warm towels, blankets, and other amenities. Thanks to these services, he says, "The patient is much more relaxed, and it's a much better experience for me and the patient."

For Christi E. Smith, RDH, spa dentistry has allowed her to operate her own business, Ageless Aesthetics. Over the past year and a half, she has opened three locations in dental offices in Kentucky. "I can do all their fill-in work as a dental hygienist but then also run my own business with spa and cosmetic procedures," says Smith, who has been a dental hygienist for more than a decade. "I do laser hair removal, permanent makeup, microdermabrasion, oxygen facials, and chemical peels. I love it and it is going great." Patients benefit from having spa services available, she says, because it's "more relaxing, and they do not have to go somewhere else for other treatments."

The Skeptics

In the opinion of some oral health care providers, though, treatments such as massages and skin care procedures belong in an entirely separate environment from oral health care services. "While I feel that it is important to help a patient feel as relaxed and comfortable as possible, I feel that this type of anxiety control really works against us," says Heather Gronemeyer, RDH, BS, a dental hygienist in private practice in Carol Stream, Illinois. "We are trying to convey at every dental appointment that dentistry is a health care issue. When we provide all of these luxuries and pampering, we are portraying that dental care is primarily for aesthetic purposes. While I understand there is an aesthetic component to dentistry, to provide services such as foot rubs during their appointment really detracts from our primary health care concern. I had a friend who went to one of these 'spa' offices in Naperville, Illinois, and can you believe that when they were confirming his appointment the day before they asked him what flavor lip balm or gloss he wanted? That is totally ridiculous to me."

"I was amazed to read of this concept," says Sarah Gilder, EDH, a British dental hygienist in private practice in London. "This totally undermines our profession and gives the public the idea that dental hygiene treatment is part of a beauty package. We are constantly trying to educate the public on dental health and that seeing a hygienist is not just to get their teeth polished to improve the aesthetics of the mouth. Periodontal disease is a serious issue, and to

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link it with beauty or spa treatments is misleading to those who really need our professional help.”

The Alternatives

There are other ways to help patients relax, adds Langdon. “The key to relaxation in the dental office is ambiance and a friendly staff that puts the patients first,” she

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says. “In Florida, I had a chance to work at several different beautiful offices. Many of them were like being in your own home, only nicer.”

And while a peaceful, calm, friendly, and helpful atmosphere is key, according to Langdon, she says it’s the “staff [that] can make or break an office. The

patient’s first encounter in the dentist’s office is through [the dentist’s] staff. If the staff is knowledgeable, friendly, and has true concern for the patient’s well-being, the dentist can be more successful in his/her practice.”

Langdon also points out that the fears many people have about going to their oral health care visits are unfounded. “The art of dentistry has changed over the years,” she says. “We still hear stories from our grandparents about how horrible it was to go to the dentist when they were children. [It’s] is not like that anymore. We need to educate people about the painless dentistry that is being performed today.”

Cindy Merback, RDH, says she understands the reservations some people have about spa dentistry, but she is willing to give the idea a chance. “The phrase ‘spa dentistry’ initially takes me to Rodeo Drive with its name and potential Hollywood price tag,” Merback says, a mobile dental hygienist who provides services to residents of skilled care, long-term care, and assisted living facilities in Maple Glen, Pennsylvania. “But in thinking further, the 21st century prides itself on homeopathic alternatives to conventional approaches to medicine,

so why shouldn’t dentistry be included? I don’t believe spa dentistry would trivialize oral health care—certainly if those dental practices that advertise themselves as ‘dentistry for cowards’ haven’t done so already. Those folks who are open-minded to alternative approaches, which include mind/body relaxation, might just welcome this new concept.”

The Proponents

Deborah Zelkowski, RDH, who works in a dental practice in Livonia, Michigan, does not work in a spa setting, currently, but she thinks there is no way that spa services could undermine oral health care. “The patients [who] come into our office already realize the importance of being there every three to six months for recalls or they wouldn’t keep their appointments,” she says. “Spa services are only an extra delightful benefit. And I do not consider spa services such as reflexology or massage as cosmetic. I consider them as necessary. A facial, manicure, or pedicure is cosmetic, and by the way, a lot of dentistry is cosmetic.”

“I believe that spa-type services such as reflexology and massage would be greatly beneficial to patients just to relax them, whether it’s prior to treatment or after dental work,” Zelkowski continues. “So many patients today have a lot of work done at once, in my practice, to avoid many appointments, and they are in the chair in a Trendelenberg position with their mouths wide open for hours. We do give them bathroom and walk-around breaks, but a chair massage for the shoulders, neck, and head after treatment would be very welcoming. Or maybe even to have that service provided halfway through treat-

ment would be great too. I have been providing gum massage with a wet gauze to all tissues after scaling and root planing for years, and patients love it. It compresses the tissues and is just soothing.”

Massage and other relaxation services should be offered to staff members as well, Zelkowski says, “to keep us relaxed, limber, and stress-free, so we can keep on working and doing what we love to do.”

Karpis concurs, “I think you would have a much happier staff if they got massages on their breaks and had lavender candles burning in the office,” she says.

“The people don’t really come here for the massage—they come here for the quality of the dentistry. But what’s wrong with adding massage [or] whatever you can do to make them feel better?”