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### **A Cleaning And A Massage**

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A trip to the dentist's office includes more than getting a filling or root canal done—it's become a total spa experience



Elizabeth A. Mundschenk/Buffalo News

Patient Brad Wright gets a complimentary neck and shoulder massage from Georgia Lynn Johnson while waiting for his dental work in the offices of Dr. Robert J. Yetto.



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Dr. Robert J. Yetto's dental office includes a television that patients can watch while they're being treated.

Sitting in the dental chair waiting for the doctor to arrive, Brad Wright was happily giggling, his eyes closed, his head back.

It was an unusual sight for a dentist's office. But this was the "Cosmetic Dental Center & Spa," and Wright was getting a neck massage.

"It feels awesome," he said. "I can feel it all the way down my spine. Honestly, I never liked coming to the dentist."

Wright's attitude has been improving. "This is not to be underestimated," he said, as Georgia Lynn Johnson rubbed his shoulders.

When he first came to his Williamsville dentist two years ago, he liked the small luxury of being able to pick out a CD to listen to during the drilling and poking and scraping.

And now this.

Robert Yetto started spa treatments this fall in his newly renovated office. Such bliss is the point of a developing new dental specialty that includes patient pampering. The idea is to help patients look forward to, not dread, a trip to the dentist.

All this helps business as more and more patients seek out cosmetic work that can take hours and cost hundreds or thousands of dollars that insurance doesn't pay for. (The American Dental Association now ranks teeth whitening as the most-requested dental procedure.)

Not everyone is hip to dentistry's emerging spa side. Yet. One local dentist, who admitted he had no plans to hire a masseuse for his patients, was reluctant to say what he thought of such services. They seemed weird. Massage is foreign to tooth care, as he knows it. "It's an interesting idea," he offered, cautiously.

Dental perks are catching on anyway. About half the dentists in a 2003 ADA survey of 427 said they were offering headphones, neck rests, warm towels, drinks and snacks. Another 5 percent were going farther - with massages, facials, manicures and pedicures.

"We're transforming the office into a different place," said Kimberly Harms, an ADA spokeswoman and dentist. "It's fun being a dentist these days."

The increasing interest in spending on cosmetic dentistry has been helped by the transformations on the TV show "Extreme Makeover."

And because people are doing better by their teeth than they used to - fluoridated water has helped, dentists say - patients don't need dentures as much. Harms' practice in the 1980s had two dentists, one hygienist and denture service. Now four hygienists clean to keep gum disease at bay. Harms no longer offers dentures, because there was no demand.

Yetto may be the first and only Western New York dentist to comfort, relax and distract patients with a massage therapist and facial specialist on staff to offer moisturizing paraffin wax hand dips and heated lemon-scented face towels.

But other cities have other treats: A Manhattan dentist's office offers Botox treatments. In Miami, manicures and pedicures are a feature. A Los Angeles dentist has 3-D movie-watching glasses.

One in Hawaii promotes "smile" vacations. At \$1,000 a tooth, porcelain veneers come with limousine-hotel pickup, full-body massages and special Japanese glasses that serve as movie screens for DVD watching. His staff acts as concierge, arranging for tropical sightseeing and beach-going.

Even for a routine cleaning, which ranges from \$80 to \$120, his patients get paraffin hand dips, head and neck massage and reflexology foot massage.

"So they're having a euphoric experience with their dental cleaning," said Wynn Okuda by phone from Honolulu. "Now everyone says, 'Wow. I could do this again.' "

Kimberly Harms has been incorporating perks into her practice in small-town Farmington, Minn., for the last decade since she built her own office and took her staff to a spa. She got the idea for the approach because, she said, "I'm a big dental baby myself."

Now when her callers are put on hold they hear a recorded voice describing the garden walkway and office juice bar. Classical music plays in the waiting room. She offers blankets fresh from the dryer to warm on winter days, free lip balm and heated face towels.

This stuff works in the business known for scaring people away with its reputation for pain, Harms said. The more comfortable patients are, the more willing they are to come in for preventive care. The result, she said, is healthier patients.

Yetto was persuaded by such talk from other dentists in other cities. "Why not us?" he asked.

He spent \$400,000 to make over his office, installing flat-screen TVs for DVD watching and overhead lights for the mouth that don't glare in the eyes.

A decorator chose golden Frank Lloyd Wright paint for the waiting room along with wood borders that mimic the crosshatch design the architect made famous. Water pours over the surface of a fountain shaped like a big ball. A chair is positioned next to a table with a guest phone for patients to make calls.

While Yetto officially unveiled the changes months ago - his prices went up slightly from \$60 for a cleaning to \$65 - patients who've never had his spa experience marvel as they come in.

On one recent morning, a woman said even visits for cleanings make her anxious. She took off her rings and called it a "pleasant morning surprise" when Jennifer Schummer spread on moisturizer with a stick and brought out a heated tank filled with liquid paraffin.

The woman's hands, dipped in wax, were then wrapped in plastic wrap and covered in terry mitts. "It's a nice distraction," she said.

A man in a chair a few stalls over waited to consult with Yetto on some cosmetic improvements while leaning back with his eyes closed. "I look forward to this," he said as Johnson rubbed his neck. "It changes my whole mentality. I'm actually on time to the dentist now."

Johnson is a licensed facial specialist now studying massage at Trocaire College. Her spa colleague Schummer has her massage therapist license and works part time at another spa. The women hope patients will get interested in their services after trying samples from the dental chair. The room designated for more elaborate spa treatments, which cost extra, has a massage table, steam-heating facial equipment, soothing lights that dim and pebbles lined up on the windowsill.

While the shorter massage and hand moisturizing treatments are a free part of the dental visit, a menu with prices offers more: a 15-minute mini facial for \$20. A makeup session, \$50. A multivitamin facial for dry skin, \$60. A deep cleansing version, \$75.

So far the reaction of the patients outside the spa room has been gratifying.

"I find most people fall asleep, or relax," said Johnson. Yetto says he has been more relaxed knowing his patients are well tended.

"My stress has gone down considerably," he said. "They know our attention is all drawn towards their comfort."

After the neck massage, Wright started thinking he might be willing to pay for a longer massage one day.

Minutes later he was back.

"I was so excited about my visit, I didn't even pay," he said, standing at the reception desk, offering a check and laughing at himself.