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PAMPERING PATIENTS

Local dental offices treat clients to more than fillings and cleanings

■ BY TRACY KERSHAW-STALEY
DBJ STAFF REPORTER

Visitors to a small, red brick building on Far Hills Avenue in Kettering are treated to a world most people liken to the posh spas of Beverly Hills, Calif.

Men and women are offered hand and shoulder massages and chilled bottled water, and get to soak in the sounds of babbling brooks, views of the sky and green trees through the vaulted ceiling.

But because it's actually the office for the Dayton Dental Collaborative, visitors also get root canals, fillings, brace adjustments, mouth reconstruction, tooth whitenings and plaque scrapings.

"It should feel like the Ritz Carlton," said Gregory Shelhouse, who owns the three-dentist practice. "The old adage of 'coming to a dentist is a terrible thing' is what I'm trying to fight."

Shelhouse's approach, often called spa dentistry or boutique dentistry, first popped up in larger metropolitan areas.

Now it's becoming more common in the Midwest as dentists tap into new ways to relax their patients, said Dr. Matthew Messina, a Cleveland dentist and spokesman for the American Dental Association.

Joseph Giardullo enjoyed a shoulder massage the last time he got his teeth cleaned at the Collaborative. A nursing instructor at Sinclair Community College, Giardullo said the added touches at the office make him feel like he's experiencing a pampering reserved for the wealthy.

"When I go there, I feel like I'm getting the same kind of care that someone who is in the upper part of our society would," Giardullo said.

Dentists have been incorporating things such as fish tanks and music into their offices since the 1940s, Messina said. But spa dentistry has taken patient relaxation beyond angel fish and a comforting chair-side manner.

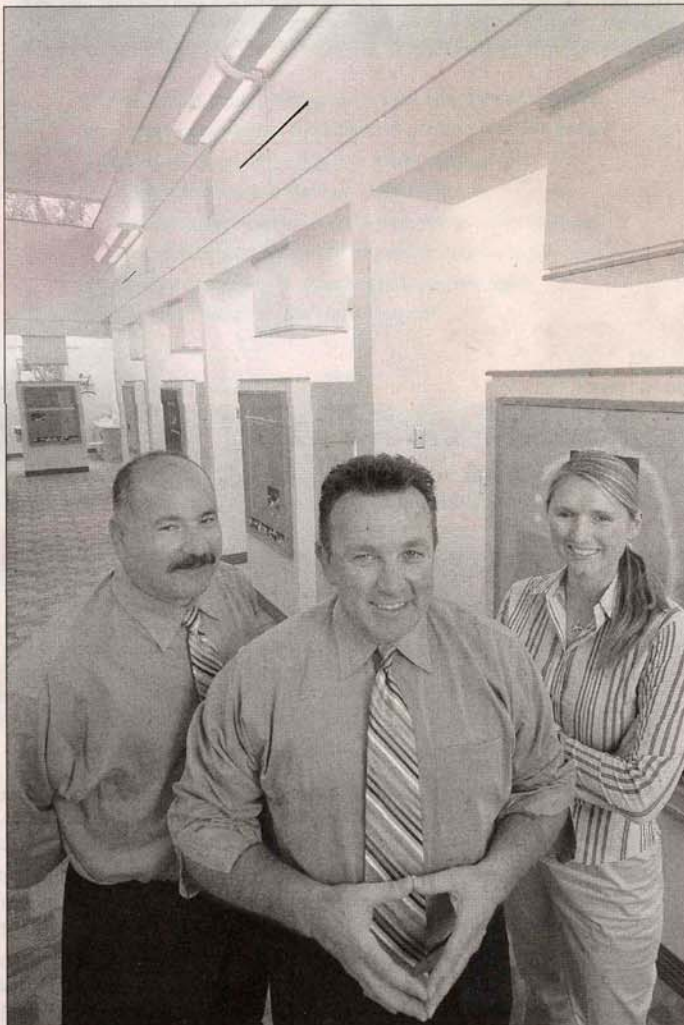
"If you look at dentistry 40 to 50 years ago, all dentist offices looked the same," he said. "Now we are seeing a spreading of people providing care the way they want to."

Americans are expected to spend more than \$78 million on dental care in 2004, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The Dayton Dental Collaborative — which has 15 employs — earned \$2.4 million in revenue the past year and expects to reach \$3 million for 2004, Shelhouse said.

The new building is bringing more patients, he said. Most dentists average about 20 new patients a month, but

Dayton Dental Collaborative

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JOHN SAMPLES ■ DBJ

Say Ahhhh: Alex Clemente, Gregory Shelhouse, center, and Kelly Arnold, dentists at Dayton Dental Collaborative, stand in the middle of their new office, which combines practical dentist equipment with spa-like amenities. Shelhouse is also the owner.

the collaborative is seeing more than 50, Shelhouse said.

Shelhouse said he offers many of the amenities because he targets a niche market of upper-income patients.

That also drove the plan for a new building, which was designed and decorated by Shelhouse's wife Jennifer, an architect at Dayton-based Martin-Beachler Architects.

The couple worked for three years on the concept. Their planning and investment resulted in a 10,000-square-foot, two-story building that resembles a modern spa more than a dentist office. And it garnered the top design award from Dental Economics, a leading industry publication.

The interior combines frosted glass, bamboo plants, track lighting, light-colored wood, round-edged counters and modern furniture. A business alcove allows busy parents to plug in their laptops while their children see the dentist. The windows in the vaulted ceiling help connect Gregory Shelhouse, an avid pilot, to his favorite place — the sky.

"There is no place in the building where an employee or patient can't see the sky," he said.

Patients can request the full-time massage therapist give a hand or neck massage

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PAMPERING:

Some rooms are equipped with TVs

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during their dental procedure or visit her private room for a neck and back massage following the appointment. The dental chair faces floor to ceiling windows, giving patients a view of the green scenery. Patients also can view a relaxing scene on a flat-screen monitor or listen to music on headphones.

The doctors consult with patients in a private room, away from threatening drills and picks. The room, set off from the rest of the office, includes a flat-screen monitor where the doctors can show patients their X-rays or videos of the procedures they need.

"I just love a very open and nonthreatening environment," Shelhouse said.

The downstairs is reserved for the staff and their families. It includes exercise equipment, a private restroom, a large television, a sleek couch, a kitchen and booths covered in a funky fabric. An outdoor patio, framed by red begonias, gives employees a place to eat outdoors. A conference room provides space to have in-house staff training and pre-and-post workday meetings to go over every patient's record and experience.

Other Dayton-area dentists offer elements of spa dentistry. At Alex Bell Dentistry, practice owner Daniel Cobb included TV sets in every room when he built a new office at 900 E. Alex Bell Road last year. Patients can request a particular channel or bring in a DVD. They also are offered teas and coffees in the waiting room, which features a large salt water aquarium.

"Some people schedule their appointment around their favorite TV program," said Lisa Manning, Cobb's office manager.

Messina, whose suburban Cleveland practice offers some amenities but not massage, said boutique dentistry is not for everyone. Some patients and doctors prefer to move quickly through the procedure. And no matter how many massage therapists or interesting views a dentist provides, the true test of a quality dentist is his or her work and the kindness of the staff, he said.

"People are more important than the physical plant," he said.

And that's where dentists who may not have the revenue to cover the extras can still find ways to relax their patients, Messina said. Educating patients on the procedure is sometimes the best form of relaxation.

"Fear of the unknown is what patients are most concerned about," he said.