

Something to smile about

ADVANCES IN COSMETIC DENTISTRY MAKE DOCTORS, PATIENTS GRIN

By Daniel P. Smith
Photos by Mary Compton

In its infancy, cosmetic dentistry held interest for Dr. Richard Parker, back when the practice meant little more than non-silver cavity fillings.

“It was a whole different world then. The techniques, materials, and chair-side tools weren’t there in those days to accomplish what we needed to accomplish,” says Parker, a Lemont-based dentist who joined the American Association of Cosmetic Dentistry in 1988, less than four years after the group’s humble founding.

In the late 1990s, however, cosmetic dentistry began to blossom, largely a product of the field’s rapid evolution as much as a growing consumer awareness of dental hygiene and a smile’s importance. Of course, TV transformation shows such as “Extreme Makeover,” which showcased cosmetic dentistry’s vast possibilities, didn’t hurt either.

Today, cosmetic dentistry is a near \$3 billion industry, one filled with over-the-counter products as well as elective procedures performed in the dentist’s chair. And dentists across the Southland noticed the surge.

“Interest in cosmetic dentistry is pretty much daily now,” Parker says, estimating as much as a 50-fold increase in the last 20 years at his practice. “People have a lot more questions now, a lot more concerns about basic things such as teeth whitening to more elaborate elements such as bridges and implants.”

From the soon-to-be-married to the recently divorced, from the baby boomers wanting a fresh look to college graduates entering their job hunt, cosmetic dentists see the gamut of patients, many of whom are specific about their desires.

“People are more focused on their mouth than ever and they’re not afraid to change it,” Frankfort-based dentist Dr. Eric Klein confirms.

PEARLY WHITES

A recent AACD survey found that 99.7 percent of adults believe a smile is an important social asset while 96 percent of respondents said a smile makes an individual appealing to the opposite sex. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed thought an unattractive smile could hurt a person’s chances for career success.

“People realize how important a smile is to their appearance, something that can lend confidence in career and social settings,” Parker says. “People want to look good, feel better, and project a better image. A smile is one way to put that best foot forward.”

For most, the key to a better smile resides in whiter, brighter teeth, a reality that has only elevated the popularity of teeth

whitening, which reduces discoloration caused by such things as cigarettes, tobacco, coffee or aging without altering the shape of teeth.

An entry-level procedure, bleaching or whitening is universally accepted these days and often the most affordable option for those seeking a brighter smile. Patients desiring a quicker fix often start with chair-side bleaching to jumpstart the whitening process before turning to tray bleaching to finish the job.

“Interest in bleaching only keeps growing,” Klein says.

Tray bleaching — so called because an

there,” he says.

Today’s cosmetic dentists look at teeth, smile, gums and facial fixtures to create a well-balanced look, and sometimes veneers can be an aid to a compelling finished product. Best of all, dentists have access to an ever-expanding list of tools, materials and procedures for elective cosmetic dentistry.

“The beauty of what’s around today is that the materials are strong and more lifelike,” Klein says. “You don’t have to take as much away from the natural tooth these days to get optimum results.”

Veneers, thin custom-made moldings that cover the front of teeth, provide an

of CAD/CAM technology, which produces veneers or crowns directly on site. Dentists scan the tooth with a laser or infrared camera, use a milling machine with various porcelains to create the veneer or crown, glaze it with custom colors, then cement the product inside the patient’s mouth.

BACK TO BASICS

In the pioneering days of cosmetic dentistry, most practitioners were hesitant to perform aggressive procedures that would drastically alter a patient’s natural structure. Somewhere in the mid-to-late 1990s, however, the pendulum swung and “radical”



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individual inserts custom-made bleaching trays into their mouth — remains the gold standard, a time-tested method that delivers on its promises. For one to two weeks, patients wear a specially designed mouth tray a few hours each day to lighten individual teeth.

To complement the whitening, dentists might finalize the look with the use a laser for gum contouring, a case-specific procedure to better highlight the patient’s brighter smile. Over-the-counter kits might also be used to enhance the effects.

TOOLS, PROCEDURES ADVANCE

In the mid-1980s, dentists set inferior porcelain pieces over unsightly teeth — a primitive veneer, Parker called it. “The idea was correct, but the execution wasn’t

alternative to traditional crowns and cover unattractive gaps as well as misshapen, stained and crooked teeth. Only whitening is a more common practice at dentists’ offices throughout the country.

Tinley Park-based dentist Dr. Robert McGonigle says cosmetic dentistry has benefited much from the improved skills of lab technicians, off-site artisans who receive models of a patient’s teeth, photographs and even imaging, and work to create a lifelike restoration. Once installed, it’s nearly impossible to tell the difference between a veneer and an original tooth.

“Lab techs might be mixing 10 to 15 different porcelains in one creation, and that would’ve been unheard of even 10 years ago,” McGonigle says. “This is a true art.”

A select group of dentists also make use

changes became en vogue. Patients endured intricate, involved procedures that might significantly alter their natural structure.

Recent years have witnessed a return to a conservative, guarded approach to cosmetic dentistry. As materials, tools and techniques have evolved and offered new opportunities, diagnosis and planning have matured as well. Today’s aim sits in maintaining the tooth structure without sacrificing the anticipated results, a patient-driven goal that cuts down on discomfort and appointment time.

“The development of new porcelains and adhesives as well as new tools, such as lasers, have allowed us to activate a more conservative approach,” Klein says. “Patients are demanding a more conservative, natural look and that’s probably the biggest trend of all.” ■

