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Dental gloss

Require a dentist over Christmas? You may be in for a shock as dental surgeries turn to ultra-modern refurbishments in an attempt to attract patients

By Sarah Urwin Jones

Dentistry has come a long way since the days of winding a bit of cotton thread around your tooth and tying the other end to a door handle.

But until recently the same could not be said for dental surgery design – for the tightly funded NHS, interior decoration came a poor second to functionality.

Now, with more than 2,000 practices going private since the Government introduced its new NHS dental contract in April – effectively capping the expansion of NHS dentistry – the landscape is changing. In the newly competitive privatised world, design and diversification are the keys to success.

It should probably come as no surprise that lifestyle is the new buzzword in private dentistry. After all, beyond your six-monthly dental MOT and any resultant medical problems, dental work is a matter of choice – albeit a choice that our image-conscious society is increasingly inclined to make.

To help patients make that choice, practices are turning to ultra-modern refurbishments to put the patient at the forefront of design.

'There's probably a practice out there for every type of patient,' says Gary Bettis of Dentist Design Planning Consultants. 'Aside from specific dental specialities, from cosmetics to orthodontics, it's about who you are. We've just finished a surgery in Belsize Park in north London that's exclusively targeted to appeal to celebrities and full of very plush interiors.'

We designed the bespoke chairs in the reception area ourselves and they were supplied by contractor RJ Hill. We created a practice in the City that was fitted out with plasma screens broadcasting information on stocks and shares.'

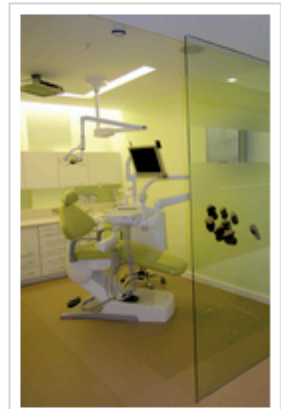
There are recognisable trends across the board. Reception areas designed to soothe and calm are fitted out in luxury materials, often with bespoke artworks or aquariums.

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Visage Lifestyle Clinic, Merchant City, Glasgow
Photo credit: Douglas Keegan



The Welbeck Clinic, London



Pentangle Dental, Newbury, Berkshire

'At many practices, it's more like walking into a nightclub or a spa than a dental surgery,' says Bettis, whose most recent practice, the Aqua Dental Spa, uses the latter concept. And it's not just in terms of aesthetic choices, such as the impressive waterfall cascading down the reception wall, that it resembles a spa. The practice will also offer massage for post-surgery patients in separate space.

"We even installed virtual-reality headsets into one dentist's chair, and in another practice we had the walls subtly changing colour – all to make it a nicer experience"

Garry Bettis, Dentist Design Planning Consultants

Other dentists have pushed the concept of diversification even further by teaming up with complementary therapists or opticians, offering anything from Botox injections to more invasive cosmetic surgery. Dental practices are no longer simply named after the chap in the white coat; now they are called clinics, spas or lifestyle centres.

At the top end of dental practice design an air of high-tech clinical efficiency still reigns. Once you've been tempted past the frosted-glass

reception desk and down the inevitably futuristic corridor, you may find yourself in a treatment room fitted out with tinted glass cupboards and work surfaces, stainless-steel fittings, flat-screen televisions playing your favourite programmes and headphones piping in your choice of music in order to drown out the sound of the drill.

'We even installed virtual-reality headsets into one dentist's chair, and in another practice we had the walls subtly changing colour – all to make it a nicer experience,' says Bettis, who once refurbished a public convenience as a dental surgery. Dentists, it seems, are having to be increasingly imaginative in locating new practices and the right aesthetic instils confidence as well as encouraging patients to buy treatments and follow-on products.

In the world of dental design, it's not just pretty lights and stylish sofas that matter. RIBA Award-winning architect Richard Mitzman is no stranger to innovation, having designed a pioneering new surgery room layout that marries hygiene, functionality and aesthetics, but he dismisses most other modern dental practice design as 'stylish waiting rooms and the same old-fashioned story backstage.

When you start building, you should start with the ergonomics and cross-infection control, not with what the reception will look like. Everything is important; the cosmetics, the aesthetics, the hygiene.' Function defines form and aesthetic.

So what does the future hold? If the lifestyle concept holds, it'll be dental surgery 'holidays' to luxury spas in the country. But if dentistry goes the way Mitzman foresees, all this will just be a footnote in history.

'The future of dentistry? The future is not to have it!' he declares. 'Dentistry is preventable, and most of what's done now is reactive. In another 100 years, I hope, it will be a thing of the past.'



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