

Dental spa? Smile when you say that

By **SUSAN LUNDINE** Associate Managing Editor

ORLANDO — In dental circles, Sherri Townsend was what is known as a gripper.

"I used to clench the armrest and feel tense and cold" at each dental office visit, says the support engineer at

"Have your dental ducks in a row, because you may get a lot more people coming in."

Lorin Berland,
Dentist

Oracle Corp.

No more.

That's because her dentist, Gary Michaelson, has revamped his Alafaya Trail practice into "spa dentistry," a hot new trend sweeping the nation.

"Now I get the back massage, eye pack, neck pack and soft music," says Townsend. "It's totally changed how I

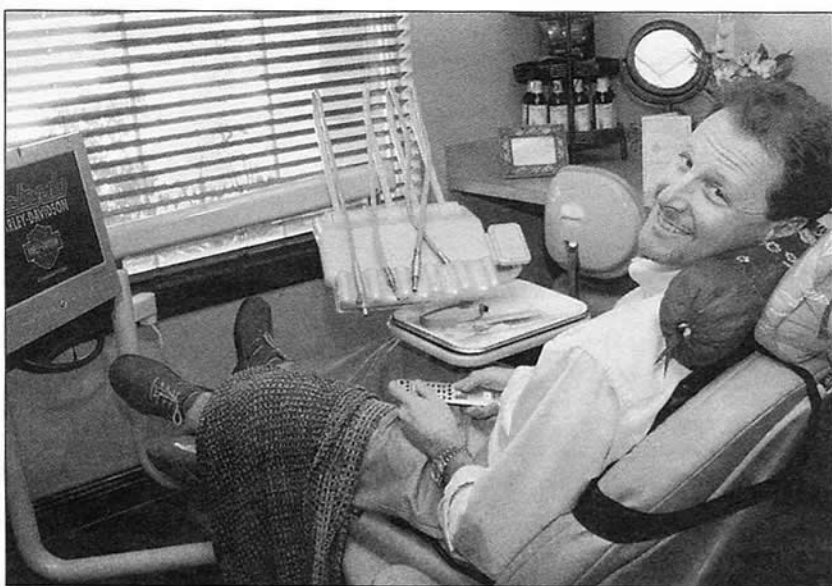


Photo by Tanya Lundine

Dentist Gary Michaelson shows off some of his office's spa amenities such as a lumbar pillow, TV, blanket and back massager.

sit in the chair.

"It's a great way to start your day."

Dentists across the nation are pulling out all the stops with spa-like amenities ranging from seaweed body wraps to facials.

"The whole trend originated out of metropolitan areas" such as New York City and Beverly Hills, but has spread even to areas such as Omaha, Neb., says Eric Nelson, spokesman for the Madison, Wis.-headquartered American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry.

"The desire to develop spa practices came out of wanting to alleviate pa-

tients' fears," he says. "It's all to make the patients as comfortable as possible."

In addition, says Nelson, many dentists are adding spa amenities as a way to attract and retain patients. "Much of cosmetic dentistry is elective and not covered by insurance, so patients are paying for it out-of-pocket — the industry is competitive," he says.

Dallas dentist Lorin Berland, the self-proclaimed founder of the spa dentistry movement, suggests that any dentist considering adding spa ameni-

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ties should first “have your dental ducks in a row, because you may get a lot more people coming in.”

Additionally, “You need to hone your skills as a dentist first, because the people you attract will be more discerning, and they’re looking for the best dentist,” says Berland, whose Dallas Dental Spa employs a massage therapist to help patients relax.

Locally, Michaelson last year decided to construct a new building and begin offering spa dentistry in east Orlando, across the street from where he had practiced for the past 10 years.

“We wanted to find some type of niche where we could be set apart from plain general dental offices,” he says. “We tried to combine something to help take patients’ minds off being at the dentist with high-end service and good dentistry.”

So he paid \$235,000 for three parcels of land, and put up a \$450,000, 3,030-square-foot building at 1870 N. Alafaya Trail. Then he added \$200,000 worth of furnishings and equipment, as well as a spa-like decor.

His patients at the Alafaya Center for Cosmetic & Family Dentistry have their choice of a heated back massager,

chilled eye compress, herbal eye pillow, warm aromatherapy neck wrap, blankets or lumbar pillow. The entire office is scented with cinnamon spice fragrance. Each dental chair has a garden view. Patients can have their jewelry cleaned while getting a paraffin wax hand treatment.

“I am trying to attract more discerning patients who understand what we can do in dentistry and who follow up on our recommendations,” says Michaelson, who got his dental degree from the University of Florida. “This isn’t for everybody.”

The investment was worth it, says Michaelson, who has seen his revenue increase from \$1.5 million to \$1.9 million since he moved into his new building a year ago.

He also plans to add a hot towel service in the near future. In addition, patients now can choose a CD to listen to, such as the Eagles, Sara McLachlan or the GooGoo Dolls, or the latest DVDs to watch, ranging from *Don't Say A Word* to *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

“Last time I was there, I watched *There's Something About Mary*,” says Amy Duncan, a personal trainer who adds that she was so relaxed that it was “hard not to laugh when he was doing the procedure.”

Michaelson’s patients also can avail themselves of a variety of snacks and

drinks in the beautifully appointed waiting area.

“I spend about \$500 a month on snacks and coffee,” says Michaelson. “I experiment with new snacks to see what goes the quickest.”

Lea Mack, an eighth-grade language arts teacher at Odyssey Middle School, says Michaelson’s new office is “so much more serene now, so much prettier. Now I don’t associate it with going to the dentist with the sound of the drill and the antiseptic smell.

“His old office was very bright and stark. Now I feel more calm.”

And after their dental work, Michaelson’s patients can find things such as hand lotion, perfume, lipstick, hair spray, and of course, toothbrushes and mouthwash, in the patient restroom on their way out.

Duncan is among those who find the spa experience calming. When the Orlando personal trainer goes for a cleaning or other dental work, she says she comes out feeling relaxed; even pampered. “I’m not apprehensive at all now,” says Duncan. “I had \$11,000 worth of work done — full porcelain veneers and gum surgery — so I’ve been in there a lot.

“It’s not a stressful experience at all.”

Best of all, says Mack, who had veneers and crowns done to hide childhood tetracycline stains on her teeth, “Now I like to smile.”

DENTAL SPA AMENITIES



Not every dental spa practice includes every one of these items, but each has been embraced by at least some dentists looking to offer luxury.

- Patient chairs with heated massagers
- Music and TV selections at each patient chair
- Video games
- Fresh flowers
- Scented candles
- Soothing waterfalls
- Hot towels
- Limo service
- Botox injections
- Facials
- Hair styling
- Reflexology
- Pedicures
- Concierges who can arrange such items as car detailing during treatments