

Dentists try to remove anxiety from office visits

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Dentists have long gotten a bad rap.

In TV and movies, if they're not cast as outright sadistic ("Little Shop of Horrors"), they're poked fun of as lacking charisma and compassion ("Ghost Town"). And their offices are depicted as sterile lairs of pain where patients are greeted with trays of sharp instruments and the shrill scream of drills.

By Hollywood standards, Dr. Donald Staten and Dr. Kathleen Woodruff of Springfield would seem to be miscast. But they're fairly typical of the modern dentist. In a field that requires a lot of technical knowledge and expertise, they've found that their social skills are among their greatest assets.

"I had an instructor say to me one time, 'Remember, there's a person connected to that tooth,'" Staten said.

Often, the person connected to that tooth would rather be somewhere else. According to a study by the Journal of the American Dental Association, about 45 million Americans experience nervousness or fear when visiting the dentist.

Dental schools have become more sensitive to that fact and have adjusted their curriculum accordingly.

"You take a lot of behavioral science courses. They want you to learn the people technique," said Staten, who studied dentistry at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville (SIUE).

Improvements in technology have made painless dentistry less of an oxymoron. The addition of fluoride to treated drinking water has gone far to reduce cavities.

And then there's the balloon animals.

Woodruff, 53, picked up the craft while attending dental school at the State University of New York in Buffalo. She was at a children's hospital as part of a pediatrics minor program and saw how the residents used balloon animals to entertain and relax their patients.

"It's probably the most practical skill I have. Even adults ask for them," Woodruff joked.

Introducing kids to the dentist

Balloon animals are just part of the environment that Staten and Woodruff create at their office, 2041 West Iles Ave., to put patients at ease.

"We try to make our office look like a home," Staten said.

The walls of his personal office are papered with drawings made by his children and patients. Family photos are proudly displayed. And there are boxes of small toys given as tokens of bravery after successful visits.

Staten, 48, estimates that about 40 percent of their patients are under age 16. So he and Woodruff try to make children feel comfortable.

"All of our staff are pretty well-versed in the cartoons of the day," Staten said.

Staten recommends bringing in children at about age 3 so they can get familiar with the surroundings



of a dentist's office. Observing a parent or an older sibling during a routine visit can help diffuse any anxiousness they may feel.

When children are old enough to require dental care, he's careful to proceed slowly. He's sympathetic to the fear his profession sometimes inspires.

"If a child is particularly scared, we'll bring them in for multiple appointments and not charge for any of those appointments, as many times as it takes to get them to relax," he said. "Kids aren't anxious because they want to be. They're not misbehaving because they're difficult. There's something intrinsic that is frightening them."

During these initial visits, the staff might show a child the instruments, explain what a procedure entails or just talk so they can get to know each other.

"The long-term investment we're making in their confidence is going to make them a good patient for us," Staten said.

That investment sometimes means thinking fast.

One time, Woodruff treated a young girl, about 2 or 3 years old, who came in because she had taken a fall and knocked loose a tooth that needed to come out. To diffuse any nervousness, Woodruff started talking up the Tooth Fairy and the treasure the girl would find under her pillow in the morning.

During the procedure, as sometimes happens when baby teeth are extracted prematurely, the tooth popped out of the socket and sailed through the air, and that was the last anyone saw of it. (Woodruff thinks it fell down the heating register.) The girl had nothing but an empty space in her smile to show for her ordeal.

"I said to the father, 'If you can be back here in a half hour, I'll have a tooth for you,'" Woodruff recalled, laughing.

She ran home, retrieved one of her kid's baby teeth that she had saved over the years and brought it back to the office to give to the girl.

"My kids thought it was really gross, but we had built the Tooth Fairy up so much, what else were we going to do?" she said.

Adults get nervous, too

Of course, children aren't the only ones who need compassion. The dentists' approach to a nervous adult is similar to how they treat a scared child.

Staten recalled one adult patient whose fear manifested itself in an unusual way.

"I don't know if it was a reflection of his fear of dentistry or my personal appearance, but when I walked into the room, he'd start to gag," he said.

It was both a reflexive reaction and a defense mechanism that prevented Staten from performing any work. Over time and after many visits, they were able to get him to relax. Today, they can comfortably perform any procedure he requires.

Unlike dentist offices of yore, in which patients were put into a room and the door closed, Staten and Woodruff's office has an open floor plan. Patients can't see each other while they're being treated, but they can hear each other. Any sounds of discomfort, however, are drowned out by the lively banter of the dentists and their staff.

As much as anything, the constant chatter creates the family atmosphere that helps patients relax.

Staten is one of eight children, and he and his wife, Kathy, are the father of four. Woodruff also has seven siblings, and she and her husband, Bob, have three children. They say they feel comfortable around people of all ages, and working amidst bustle and activity.

They understand, however, that some patients prefer a more business-like atmosphere.

Staten had one patient who let him know what she thought of his gregarious personality.

"I brought her back and she said to me, 'I thought you'd never shut up. I sat out there and listened to you yak and yak; you were making me crazy,'" he recalled.

Staten limited the conversation while treating her, although he noted that she's no longer a patient.

"Some people feel relaxed when we talk, and others just want us to shut up and work, but the bottom line is that if you don't like the interaction, this probably isn't the place for you," he said.

'We really like people'

It's not all fun and laughter at the office. Many procedures can be quite complicated and traumatic to the patient.

"It's one thing to be joking when you're doing certain things, but when we're doing the intense work, it gets quiet," Woodruff said.

As with any dentist, their primary goal is to encourage people to take care of their teeth by receiving regular dental care.

Awhile back, one of Staten's elderly patients arrived at an appointment not long after a previous visit. He wasn't due to have any work done, so Staten asked the man what prompted his return.

"(The man) told me he was diagnosed with cancer and only had three months to live. He said, 'I need to say goodbye to all my friends, and I consider you my friend,'" Staten recalled.

Staten was both touched and saddened by the visit, but it epitomizes what he loves best about his profession.

"I don't have any secret formulas. I can tell you that we've invested a lot of emotion on a lot of different levels with patients, getting them through different dental situations. But we also really do share in the people's lives," he said.

"We really like people. When you like people, it's pretty easy to want to spend your time getting them through a situation that's traumatic, and it can be done by letting them know we care."

Photographs by T.J. Salsman/The State Journal-Register

Top Photo: Dental hygienist Jolyn Yard occupies Jonathon Hauer, 12, with conversation about iPods and video games while cleaning his teeth. Jonathon's sister, Laura, 9, waits for her turn in the chair.

Second Photo: Lindsey Hauer, 9, selects a toy from the treat box after completing her cleaning at Dr. Kathy Woodruff's office.