

Eco-Friendly Dentistry

By Angelique Caffrey

Step through the doors of Fox Dental, Ltd., and you'll immediately notice the space's warm, well-lit reception room, and neat, clean welcome desk. The office's intrinsic "greenness," however, might not be instantly apparent. Yet it's definitely there.

Dr. Becky Fox, DMD, sole proprietor of the Lemayne, Pennsylvania, practice she took over four years ago, is quick to list the eco-friendly measures she and her dedicated staff have put into place. From conveniently located recycling bins to incredibly detailed digital x-rays, Fox has fully embraced what she considers her responsibility to bring cutting edge, environmentally safe options to her patients and community.

"Part of our profession is staying current and making a conscious effort to maintain our standards," she avers.

While Fox's commitment to greening her facility may initially sound atypical, the reality is that many dental professionals are beginning to follow suit. Also, with a bevy of readily available organic products, high tech software,

and eco-friendly choices at their disposal, dentists across the state are asking the 21st century question: "How can we become greener?"

Fortunately, the first steps toward creating an environmentally sound facility aren't difficult to undertake.

Green Dentistry Step #1: Recycling, Reusing, Reducing

Dental offices are usually awash in paperwork, from cumbersome charts to heavy scheduling books. Perhaps this is what makes Fox's office so unique – she and her team work with very little paper. All scheduling, patient information, x-rays, calendars, and insurance submissions have been 100% percent computerized, allowing each member of the Fox Dental staff to have immediate access to records.

Going without pen and paper may seem daunting at first glance, especially for those who are accustomed to the traditional ways of dentistry. But Fox and her colleagues wouldn't go back to the routine of hunting for files and fiddling

through charts. Besides, muses Fox, there isn't any need to "translate" messy handwriting, as everything is neatly typed and organized.

The little amount of paper that does find its way into Fox's practice is either salvaged as scrap paper or recycled through a third-party company. In fact, according to their recycling corporation's data, Fox Dental saved a total of four trees in the fourth quarter of 2008.

Other simple, environmentally friendly alternatives that can be readily implemented by dental professionals include reducing the amount of typically disposed products like paper-and-plastic bibs, plastic/paper cups, and paper head rests (for examining room chairs). For instance, some forward-thinking dentists across the nation have moved toward organic cotton cloth bibs and reusable glasses. Though the items must be washed regularly (preferably in detergents that have no harsh chemicals, such as those whose main ingredients are natural disinfectants like tea tree oil and thyme), they have a shelf life, thereby eliminating a significant amount of annual waste and byproducts.

Green Dentistry Step #2: Embracing Technology

As Fox's example shows, technology is at the point where a dentist can show patients their x-rays on a computer screen or remotely access patient files from his or her Palm Pilot or laptop. Many dental-practice-specific software packages on the market help make the transition to a paperless office easier: Fox relies on Patterson's EagleSoft®, but there are other options, too.

Technology has also advanced in terms of dental equipment. From the steam autoclaves that most dentists now use to sterilize instruments (instead of harsh-





smelling, potentially toxic chemicals like glutaraldehyde) to digital x-rays (offering 90 percent less radiation than their traditional counterparts), alternatives are plentiful. Another technology, health-conscious choice is lead-free aprons (to replace worn-out, lead-based ones) made with Xenoflex® alloy sheating [Check them out at xentoflex.com/xentotech.pdf].

Additionally, there are new pieces of equipment geared at making everyday processes smoother for patients and dentists. For example, the software-based CEREC® ceramic CAD-CAM system reduces both the time and materials needed to produce traditional crowns.

Green Dentistry Step #3: Choosing Eco-friendly Behind-the-Scenes Items

Without a doubt, there's plenty that occurs out of the public eye in a dentist's office that can contribute to the eco-friendliness of the practice, but may never be known to consumers. Dentists who want to take the plunge into truly environmentally sound atmospheres can opt for paints that do not contain volatile organic compounds (VOCs), cork-based flooring, and recycled glass countertops, among other products. Even living plants can make a green (literally) contribution.

Only six months after taking over the practice, Fox made her own "inevitable" switch by electing to add an amalgam separator onto her vacuum system when the building's older system needed to be replaced. Patients will never see this nonglamorous green choice, but Fox is pleased to have "walked the talk."

"Whenever I feel like I have the choice [to go green], I elect to do it," she says.

Dentists can even get a handle on their current carbon footprint by making use of online calculators like those at carbonfootprint.com and energystar.gov. At those sites, as well as others, CO₂ reduction measures are clearly laid out. This allows dentists to pinpoint exactly how out-of-sight changes as simple as reducing daily water usage can directly affect the amount of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere.

Green Dentistry Step #4: Changing the Face of Your Practice

Ready to make a radical change? Want to go that extra mile in creating a green

dental office and really make a statement regarding your pledge to protect the environment? Then consider embracing some of the fresh ideas from a Berkeley, California-based practice, Transcendental, has applied. This nationally heralded eco-dental practice combines the best of all worlds, offering patients a spa-like atmosphere where dentistry and holistic health merge in a decidedly creative, calming environment.

Transcendental has set the green bar high. The practice boasts wall paper made from reclaimed bark and paper pulp, recycled-woods furniture and, yes, even healing foot massages for any procedure that takes longer than 40 minutes. Through and through, it's obvious that Dr. Fred Rockross, the eco-dentist behind Transcendental, is energetically committed to producing a dental experience unlike any that's been previously seen in the USA.

To be sure, Dr. Rockross's options are not the biggest money-savers, a fact that no doubt plays a huge role in why some dentists eschew the route to becoming green. However, for dental professionals such as those at Transcendental and, closer to home, Fox Dental, the advantages of being environmentally friendly outweigh the price tag.

"Don't let 'sticker shock' turn you off," counsels Fox. "Doing the right thing for your patients carries on to the county [in which you practice], which carries on to the environment."

Making the Green Choice

Whether you want to make small changes or larger ones, every step will count. Fox explains her viewpoint: "Take time to research options. Make intentional changes in a slowly progressive manner. Think about longevity – if you're doing it [environmentalism] in your personal life, why not do it at the office?"

Fox also asks dentists to consider the impact that their eco-friendly decisions will have on those who walk through their office doors. "I think if your patients know you're conscientious as how you're practicing, they know you'll take care of them."

Suggestions for Greening Your Office

- Reduce your reliance on paper.
- Ask patients if they want a "text appointment card" before automatically writing one for them.
- Purchase eco-friendly complimentary dental supplies, such as organic toothpaste and toothbrushes made from recycled plastic.
- Set up recycling bins around the office.
- Invest in digital x-rays.
- Use green cleaning supplies.
- Choose compact fluorescent light bulbs.
- Recycle everything that can be recycled, from waiting area magazines to printer cartridges.

Annual Savings on "Green" Alternatives

- \$178 – Reusable cups (instead of those made from paper or plastic)
- \$8,769 – Digital billing, charts, and x-rays
- \$37,000 – Toothcolored (instead of silver amalgam) restorations

Source: www.ecodentistry.org

