Some ‘styles’ are eternal

Cosmetic dentistry will never go out of style. Why? Because a beautiful smile is always in style. I first became interested in cosmetic dentistry when I was in high school, working with dentures for my family dentist. I couldn’t believe what a boost a nice denture can give a patient. It was more exciting than plastic surgery. In fact, given the acrylic nature of dentures, it was “plastic surgery” at its finest. The dentist I worked for taught me a valuable lesson that applies to all aspects of cosmetic dentistry: A good-looking denture always fits better.

After dental school, I began my residency at the dawn of adhesive cosmetic dentistry. Back then, cosmetic dentistry wasn’t considered “serious” dentistry, at least not by most dentists. Yet, my patients thought it was serious. Heck, they thought it was damn exciting. They even thought it was glamorous too, which made me even more excited to get involved. I was there at the beginning for good and for bad. The good is that I’ve seen a lot and learned a lot, and the bad is that I made many mistakes in the beginning. This is why what we do is called “a practice.”

It’s also why I urge all cosmetic dentists to always consider first the most conservative approach. As health-care providers our first obligation is to do no harm. The least amount of treatment that yields the desired outcome is the best treatment. You can always do more, but you can’t put back what you’ve already taken away.

That’s why almost all cosmetic cases begin with whitening, then consider bonding before veneers, veneers before crowns, endo before extractions, implants before bridges and so on. Unfortunately, with all the excitement over cosmetic dentistry from both the public as well as the dentists’ perspective, too much cosmetic dentistry is being done, and not always conservatively nor correctly. This has led to another growth industry in dentistry — the redos. And these are not always the happiest or the most appreciative patients.

That’s why the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD) is so important. It’s the only organization that’s dedicated to training cosmetic dentists, and the accreditation process substantiates that commitment. The AACD recommends that all cosmetic dentists visually document everything. Moreover, with digital photography, it’s now very easy to do this. A cosmetic dentist should be his or her own worst critic. Everyone should have a digital camera and take a full series of before-and-after photos of every patient. These can be just as important as radiographs, and when it comes to esthetics, even more so. In addition, be sure you share all these pictures with your patient. This is an important start and finish to every cosmetic case.

And please keep in mind that recent studies have proven that certain axioms — such as men have square teeth and women have round teeth — are not always true. That’s why it’s important to use smile guides to help the patient choose the appropriate shape and length combination for the front teeth, especially for worn dentition and redos. I also recommend composite mock-ups, cosmetic imaging and/or a “trial smile” before beginning any big cosmetic case. You always want to know where you’re going before you begin.

I truly believe that only a dentist that’s forever critical of his or her own work can continue to improve. Finally, I encourage every dentist who wants to provide cosmetic dentistry to join the AACD and begin the accreditation process.

Sincerely,
Lorin Berland, DDS, FAACD