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NEWS & OPINION

Smile design: Art or science?

By Dr Sushil Koirala, Nepal

It is interesting to note the trends in cosmetic dentistry training these days. Cosmetic dentists are spending time and money learning various smile design techniques and protocols. In recent years, the use of computer-guided digital devices (hardware and software) in smile design has become quite popular and many clinicians are already trained in different kinds of digital smile design protocols.

If we carefully analyse digital smile design techniques or protocols, it can be established that they generally follow three steps: photography, digital analysis (calculation) and digital wax-up (drawing, cut and paste). After these clinical steps, dentists have two choices for achieving the final trial smile.

The first and most popular one is a laboratory-fabricated acrylic or composite restoration and the other one is CAD/CAM fabricated. For the manual approach, the laboratory technician has to manually wax up the digital design. Even though digital smile design uses computer-guided techniques and protocols, the entire design process is not as fast as many clinicians may think. This is because the dentist needs to develop specific computer graphic skills, be involved in digital communication with the laboratory, as well as pursue emotional counselling and marketing tactics.

Several months ago, I asked some of my close Asian, American and European Friends who have completed various digital smile design courses about the use of digital smile design protocols in their daily practice. It was surprising to learn that none of these popular cosmetic dentists regularly use digital smile design in their practices. They frankly informed me that such techniques are time-consuming and computer design is not as easy as the day-to-day restorations that they do. I was also told that they use digital smile design protocols only when they need to present clinical cases for conferences or seminars.

I was quite pleased with their candid comments, as I rarely use digital smile design myself, because I do not want to give stock smiles to my patients based on universal design formulas. I apply art more than science when designing new smiles for my patients. I respect my patients’ personal desires and needs and guide them in achieving natural and realistic smiles with low biological cost. I have never sold cosmetic dentistry using the emotional counselling tactics of digital smile design, because I firmly believe that exploiting emotions to sell cosmetic dentistry actually constitutes emotional blackmailing of patients.

Keeping all of the above in mind, I have recently developed a simple “Quick Smile Design” concept, which is not new but a logical modification of the age-old direct composite mock-up technique.

The beauty of this simple technique is that it is fast, realistic and predictable. You do not need to open your computer and spend time using Photoshop. Your patients will instantly be able to give their comments about the aesthetics and level of comfort of your smile design. You do not need to acquire computer graphic skills. Moreover, this technique indirectly enhances the dentist’s direct cosmetic restoration skills. I hope you will have the opportunity to learn about it in the upcoming issue of the cosmetic dentistry magazine.

Dr Sushil Koirala is Chairman of the Vedic Institute of Smile Aesthetics. He is also Editor-in-Chief of Dental Tribune’s sister publication cosmetic dentistry.

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