Breaking through the barriers

During a check-up, is it acceptable to comment on how to make their teeth look better cosmetically, or wait to be asked? Jacob Krikor explores

Whether as a dentist, it’s your job to recommend cosmetic enhancements while carrying out an annual check-up is a difficult question, and one I ask myself a few times each week. As patients sit in the chair and open wide waiting for me to investigate caries and periodontal problems, I find it difficult to forget about the discoloured crack I find in the middle of the upper central incisors or the retroclined incisors that are making the laterals stick out more than they deserve. Or in the case of the young lady who spends hours on her make-up ignoring the fact that her teeth and her smile, in fact all her face, could look much more attractive with brighter teeth. Of course I still have my preconceptions: this patient would most likely not bother about the front teeth, are not interested in having brighter teeth and most likely don’t mind the discoloured filling on their incisor. But how many times have I found myself mistaken? Patients have asked often me what I could do to improve their smiles, at which point I feel triumphant when I start talking through the options.

Asking the question

I have recently started asking patients that I have been seeing for many years that very question which I did not have the courage to ask before. Many patients follow make-over programmes on TV and think that the dentistry offered there is probably too expensive or too Harley Street or only done by celebrity dentists.

So, unless you show your patients what you can offer and what your team is capable of achieving, they will always have that misconception. I am not advocating going crazy and looking at every patient as a make-over case. I am simply explaining how I found myself developing into a more confident dentist trying not only to correct the function, but also the aesthetics.

The worst thing that can happen now is when the patient says: ‘Ah, I’ve had it for so long that I’m not bothered anymore’. That’s it. You can then go on digging in the molars and inspect the palate and shuffle the tongue from right to left.

A happy patient

I have a lady who is an existing patient of mine that I have been seeing for few years now. I’ve made her a bridge from the UL1 to UL5 some years ago to match the right side to replace an old bridge that she wasn’t happy with, without me seeing the bigger picture. Until a couple of months ago, and for some reason, I asked whether she wanted to have something done to improve her smile. It didn’t take long before she explained how much she was aware of her teeth and how often she hid them when she smiled. (See Figures 1 to 4.)

Before this case, I always thought of the plastic surgeons Sean McNamara and Christian Troy in the glamorous American series Nip/Tuck and the way they start their conversation with their patients: “So, what don’t you like about yourself?” And I’ll be honest with you, I did not like the sound of it simply because I wasn’t one of them. Today, I ask my patients the same question and I like the sound of it because I am a dentist with the power to improve smiles every day.

About the author

Jacob Krikor graduated from Dental School (Odontologen) in Gothenburg, Sweden in 1998. After working in general practice in Sweden for two years, he moved to the UK and now has his own practice in Bexhill on Sea. Jacob is also the founder of two websites: www.askyourdentist.com for patient information and www.odonti.com, created to make life easier for dental professionals. To contact him, email drjacobkrikor@odonti.com.