Broadening horizons

Being able to meet the demands of adult patients for orthodontic treatments means there is now a significant potential market, says Andrew McCance

Dental professionals in the UK are experiencing more and more requests from their patients for teeth-straightening treatment as they begin to see the benefits of it from both an aesthetic and a health point of view.

As many dentists are no doubt fully aware, tighter restrictions on national healthcare budgets mean that access to free orthodontic treatment for patients is becoming increasingly limited. Recent policy changes mean that patients’ treatment needs are now assessed using the Index of Orthodontic Treatment Need (IOTN); the NHS usually only funds treatment in cases classified at grade four or five level, whilst grade three treatments are considered on a case-by-case basis. Although children under 18 are currently treated free, in Ireland, plans are underway to introduce a charge for all except the most severe cases of orthodontic treatment, including those of children.

No funding

The situation for adults seeking state-sponsored orthodontic treatment is even worse, with NHS funding virtually non-existent. The British Orthodontic Society (BOS) has made it clear to patients that: ‘In principle, adult orthodontic treatment can be provided under the terms of the NHS, provided the need for treatment is sufficient.’ In practice:

―NHS contracts held by many orthodontists do not include adult patients. In some areas there are no orthodontists at all with NHS contracts to treat adults.‖

This trend within the public dental care sector runs counter to the increase in the number of adults interested in undergoing orthodontic treatment, with some reports currently putting the figure of growth in this sector as high as 36 per cent. According to one magazine, an orthodontist in Manchester reported a 560 per cent growth in adult orthodontic patient numbers between 2005-09, compared with the previous five-year period.

Making sacrifices

This trend is borne out in an Ipsos research survey, which found that one in five adults now believe that their teeth would benefit from straightening with braces. Meanwhile, the British Lingual Orthodontic Society suggests that anecdotal evidence obtained from members indicates that people are prepared to make financial sacrifices in order to have treatment; they see it as a valuable investment in their health and overall appearance.

However, with the Department of Health clear on its policy to not fund treatment undertaken for work that is deemed ‘not clinically necessary’, many patients eager to have the treatment for cosmetic reasons are left with little option but to go private.

Going private

Naturally, this is good news for privately-owned practices, which are happy to fill the widening gap in available public sector care. However, this market does not have to be the sole preserve, both in terms of Orthodontic Specialists. In some cases, patients wanting access to teeth straightening procedures may not live near one of the 1,200 orthodontists currently on the UK specialist register. Many also do not want to compromise their lifestyles or appearance during treatment if they don’t have to.

For example, the percentage of men seeking orthodontic work is increasing and, for whatever reason, they are less likely to use visible methods of treatment. Here, systems utilising removable clear positioners offer an alternative option that is more discrete whilst still providing the improved smile aesthetic that has become so desirable.

Systems utilising ‘invisible braces’ or aligners, such as Clearstep, offer GDPs a means to provide their patients with a wide range of treatments that don’t require prolonged specialist training or expensive new practice equipment. Instead, a familiarisation with the system and continued technical support mean that patients can be retained in-house rather than being referred away.

Efficient treatment

In order to provide appropriate support to general practitioners without any previous orthodontic experience, Clearstep ensures that every case undertaken by a GDP is submitted to their diagnostically. Using patient records gathered by the treating practitioner, each case is diagnosed and treatment is planned by a specialist orthodontist.

The reports generated provide a clinical presentation that incorporates that patient’s objectives, while providing the most suitable treatment options available. The treatment planning will review the needs of the case and incorporate additional appliances from the five elements of the Clearstep System, should they be required. By combining treatment mechanics, the patient is offered the most efficient treatment in terms of timescales and cost.

Being able to meet the demands of adult patients for orthodontic treatments means there is now a significant potential market, and one that includes patients interested in broadening their area of interest to include orthodontics. This can only be good for the private dental care sector, both in terms of patient access, and of course, in terms of the bottom line for dentists in private practice.

References:
5. ’What is IOTN?’ The British Orthodontic Society, at http://www.bos.org.uk/orthodonticsandthenhs/whatisiotn accessed on 29/04/10
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About the author

Andrew McCance, BDS, FDSRCS (Eng), FDSRCS (Edin), MSc, formerly a senior house dental surgeon at St George’s Hospital, Tooting and senior lecturer at Great Ormond Street, developing his expertise through a PhD in orthodontic therapy at Great Ormond Street Hospital and senior lecturer at Great Ormond Street College London. In the mid 1980s, Dr McCance began to develop the Clearstep brace, based on the demands from patients for invisible treatment, and later established his specialist practices. He is currently teaching the Clearstep System to a large number of orthodontists worldwide. For more information, email info@clearstep.co.uk or visit www.clearstep.co.uk.

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