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 experienc- ing 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 classed 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 nonexistent. 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 pulling the figure of growth in this sector as high as 56 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 not to 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 can access the hidden gap in available public sector care. However, this market does not have to be the sole preserve 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 keen to use visible methods of treatment. Here, systems utilising removable clear positioners offer an alternative option that is more discreet 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 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 diagnostic faculty. Using patient records gathered by the treating practitioner, each case is diagnosed and treatment is planned by a specialist orthodontist.

References:

About the author

Since qualifying in dentistry from Guy’s Hospital Dental School, Dr Andrew McCance has gained a wealth of experience in multi-disciplinary orthodontic practices. He is also keen to share his experience as a member of the specialist register. He is currently taking a leading role in the Clearstep journey to bring orthodontics to a wider audience. For more information, go to www.OFF_LeicesterRoyalInfirmary.com or visit www.clearstep.co.uk.