With millions of people tuning in to TV programmes like Embarrassing Bodies, 10 Years Younger and Extreme Makeover, the public has never been more aware of the possibilities for changing their looks. These reality shows have provided exposure to the cosmetic dentistry industry, and, together with increasingly cost-effective treatments, have shown that procedures are now available to almost anyone, rather than restricted only to the rich and famous. Now more than ever, the British public are keen to have straight, white teeth like their favourite celebrities and there is no question that demand for cosmetic dentistry is on the rise. Orthodontic treatment in particular has benefited from countless pages of publicity thanks to famous brace wearers such as Tom Cruise or Kate Middleton.

Assumption
In the past, people have generally assumed that only the teeth of the young can be moved into a more attractive, even position, but the fact is that orthodontics can work at any age. Patients are now becoming increasingly aware that good teeth can not only boost their self-confidence but also improve their general health.

Patient Knowledge
In fact, the once unfashionable view of wearing braces is now acceptable even for adults. This is helped enormously by the sheer range of modern treatments available, which are far less obtrusive than the traditional ‘train tracks’ and are often more effective, more quickly.

With this increased interest in cosmetic dentistry and the ability to search the Internet for the various options available, patients are more knowledgeable now than ever before and they expect to have all of these choices available to them. This awareness and level of expectation puts general dental practitioners under considerable pressure to provide their patients with the desired specialised treatments.

For all dentists, their patients’ wellbeing is paramount.
Particular treatments sometimes need special expertise and they strive towards top quality treatment that is suited to each individual patient’s need. However, some particular treatments, such as orthodontics and implant work, can require particular expertise, and often expensive, specialist equipment.

In order to provide this service, which is tailored to the unique requirements of their patient, there is the option for dentists to refer some or all of the work to a more suitably trained and equipped practice. This not only provides the ideal outcome for patients, it also expands the range of services the dentist can offer.

Offering alternatives
These referral practices are able to break down quite difficult or complex cases, provide second opinions or further advice, and often offer alternative or simpler treatments the referring dentist may not have even been aware of.

Dentists new to this course of action should not consider this step as an admission of defeat; rather it should be viewed as a positive move. Patients will see the referral as a demonstration, by their practitioner, that their best interests are being served, and show more trust and appreciation.

This enhanced loyalty to the practice is likely to encourage some referral patients to agree to subsequent work by their own dentist. Treatments such as teeth whitening would not have been especially appealing to patients with severely crooked teeth. However, having been referred to a specialist orthodontist, they may be more than happy to draw attention to their newly straightened teeth.

Choose carefully
Referring a patient to another practice, however, is not to be taken lightly; it is important to choose the right clinic to care for your patient and this means contacting the practice, asking to see the premises and establishing whether or not you will all work well together. The referral practice you choose needs to behave as if it were an extension of your own practice, and work as part of your team.

Leading referral practices understand the importance of your decision to refer and will be happy to provide more information or dispel any concerns you may have. They will seek to understand all your requirements for your patient and any future work you may be performing. You will also be kept informed throughout the treatment, and your approval and consent sought at every stage. In fact, the very best referral practices even provide models that you can send to your own ceramist.

For orthodontic procedures, the referral practice should work with you to your restorative plan and you would be required to sign off the treatment before the braces are removed. In the case of implants, you would expect the referral practice to be adaptable, either providing the whole restorative implant treatment or making sure communication is open with you to provide the restoration.

The referral process is undoubtedly a win-win scenario for all involved. The patient receives the best possible treatment from highly qualified and experienced professionals, while the referring dentist has a delighted patient who takes a greater interest in their smile and greater care to preserve it.

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About the author

Dr Tim Bradstock-Smith is principal of the London Smile Clinic, an award-winning centre of excellence in dentistry that is based in Central London. The Clinic offers an extensive range of services, which include specialist orthodontics, implant dentistry and dentures.

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