

GO AHEAD AND SMILE
FREE DENTAL REPORT SERIES:



**10 QUESTIONS
YOU MUST ASK
BEFORE CHOOSING A DENTIST**

A Consumer's Guide To
Quality Dental Care

Provided By:

SERENITY DENTAL
GO AHEAD AND SMILE

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INTRODUCTION

This report will cover some of the more obvious questions such as asking the dentist for references and providing costs up front and it also will give insight to more obscure questions like asking if the office is mercury-free, if there are patient education programs in place, and how the patient's comfort is ensured. Do they provide written treatment plans and the cost of treatment up front? Does the dentist insist on seeing new patients for a comprehensive exam, rather than going directly in to the Hygiene program? How does the new dental technology help ensure early and complete detection of dental issues?

Wouldn't it be nice if we could know right questions to ask a car mechanic, roofer or plumber before we hire them? Doesn't our healthcare deserve the same status? This report will also pose plenty of questions that you should ask yourself in determining the importance of each topic covered.

As covered in this report, you can learn if you're considering a respectable dental office with the latest tools in providing comfortable dental care at an overall good value. Knowing the answers to these questions will give you, the patient, a great amount of knowledge and insight in choosing the best practice to help ensure the best quality dental care.

1. WHAT ARE YOUR QUALIFICATIONS—SCHOOL, GPA, REFERENCES?

This can be very difficult to ask, or at least uncomfortable for most patients. Searching the dental provider's Web site where the patient can view pictures of the office and find invaluable information about the entire team is a good place to start. There may also be pictures of the dental providers work, as well as patient testimonials. If the dental office does not have a website, then the patient is left with asking the dental office for references. Three of these references should be current patients, and two others should be other health care professionals. There are two main reasons for getting patient and professional references. First, any person in practice should be able to provide contact information for at least three of their satisfied patients. Secondly, if a dentist cannot produce two other professionals that will attest to his or her ability as a dentist, then there may be respect or credibility issues within the dental or medical peer group.

In thirty years of practice I have only been asked for this information once. I would like to think that patients just intuitively knew just how good the office was, but in fact we know the real reason is because it's just difficult for most people to ask. With the use of the web, dentists that want the patient to be informed can provide that information and more.

Ask yourself: Wouldn't it be nice to know something about the dental team? After all, I am placing my family's care in their hands!

2. AS A NEW PATIENT, WILL YOU SEE THE DENTIST FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EXAM BEFORE YOU GO INTO THE HYGIENE PROGRAM?

It is the doctor who should be the first one to do a thorough exam. This not only includes diagnosing dental problems such as cavities and periodontal (gum) disease, but also an oral cancer screening and occlusion (bite) evaluation to determine risk for TMD (Temporal Mandibular Disorder). The dentist also needs to take the time to learn about the patient. No two people have identical dental problems, fears and desires. A proper exam takes time. Most adults should expect at least one hour for the exam and necessary x-rays. The patient should expect that kind of treatment from a dentist who truly cares to be part of the patient's long-term healthcare solution.


Ask Yourself: Which is more important at the first visit, getting my teeth cleaned, or having a proper and thorough examination?

3. ARE YOU A MERCURY-FREE DENTIST?

THIS IS A POTENTIALLY CONTROVERSIAL QUESTION - THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY VS. THE AMERICAN DENTAL SOCIETY

The correct answer is: *No mercury has ever been used in this office!*

We now know that Mercury is one of the most toxic substances known to man and is a cumulative poison, which may result in delayed symptoms that



may not be apparent for many years. Some dental practices still use the mercury amalgam restorations because they are the cheapest. Also, insurance companies use the costs of amalgam fillings to determine their level of coverage for this type of restoration.

However, 15 years ago the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ordered dentists not to dispose of leftover silver mercury amalgam restorative material in the general trash because they determined that it was toxic and harmful to landfills. Dentists are required to place leftover scrap in a special fluid-filled container for safe removal by a bio-hazard company, yet the ADA still approves the use of silver mercury fillings.

One government agency says you can't throw it away in the trash, while another says it's ok to put it in your mouth!

Dental technology has discovered new materials, such as glass ionomers, quartz resins and better porcelains, which are far more appropriate for use in patients. These materials are not only more attractive and natural looking, but also could be cost-saving when considering possible adverse health effects.

Ask yourself: When I build my own home, should I ask them to paint it with cheap lead-based paint because it will initially save me money? Do I really want the cheapest filling material used on my family?

4. DO YOU OFFER PATIENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

Knowledge is power and educational systems allow for the patient to better make informed decisions. Education is the only real hope of encouraging patients to make the necessary behavior changes that allow the patient to prevent rather than treat. Often, people are creatures of habit and hate change. While most may dislike change, the patient should be given the opportunity to know why they may suffer from an oral ailment and how to prevent other adverse diseases. Prevention thru education is also the only way to control patient's costs early. An effective education program takes a lot of time on the part of the dentist. Some dentists will not invest their time because they see no direct monetary return. Simply put, an educated patient needs dental services less often garnering the dentist less direct monetary reward.

Often, there are simple and easy ways for patients to keep gums and teeth healthy. A lot of patients are excited to know how quick and easy it is to help prevent themselves and family from having continuous and unnecessary dental problems. This ensures that patients will get the most out of their respective office visits, decrease the chance of having dental problems, have healthy teeth for a lifetime, and save money by avoiding treatment.

Ask yourself: What does it say about the dentist that withholds information and does not care if I understand all the issues completely?

5. DO YOU PROVIDE COSTS UP FRONT, FIND WAYS TO SAVE MONEY, PARTNER WITH COMPANIES THAT PROVIDE FINANCING - AND PROVIDE ALL OF THIS IN WRITING?

When a dental office is clear in explaining charges it's generally a good sign of their honesty. Ideally, the dentist will explain the treatment needs, the problems that will occur without treatment, and the associated costs or investment to do the dental work. He or she should explain the best ways to achieve optimum oral health, and often more importantly, prevent costs. This ongoing approach contributes to the overall patient education.

Another approach is to phase treatment, which allows the dental treatment to be preformed over many years allowing the financial commitment to be spread over a longer time. This usually consists of removing all cavities and restoring gum health, if needed, first. Later, crown and bridgework or optional cosmetic work is completed.

Oftentimes, a dentist will do one bridge to completion exhausting the dental budget before all active cavities or gum issues have been resolved. This leaves the cavities to become bigger and the gum issues to worsen, which leads to even more expensive problems when treated.

Also, having this information allows the patient to go home with a written treatment plan including pictures of their own teeth so they can think about their options before making a final decision. Think about how it works when

a car needs servicing. Following the diagnosis, there is an expectation of clearly communicating what services are recommended, as well as the cost *before* the work is initiated.

Often, medical and dental costs can hit at the most inopportune time and patients may prefer alternate means of payments. That's why many dental offices offer financing, either in-house or through a financial partnership with a banking institution.

A professional dental office should provide patients a range of options, such as 0% financing for several months or extended payment plans with varying interest rates. There should be a plan to fit most everyone's needs. A good dental practice will take pride in helping patients find ways to make the most out of their dental investments.

Ask yourself: Is it important to know what going to be done, why and costs upfront from my mechanic? Do I think my healthcare providers should do the same for my family and me as a mechanic does for my car?

6. WILL YOU GUARANTEE YOUR DENTAL WORK?

By law, dentists *cannot* guarantee results. But, for example, a dental office can offer a guarantee such as, "Will warrant all fillings and crowns for seven years provided that there are regular checkups." This type of "guarantee" will give the patient an incentive to be consistent with dental care. Make

sure the doctor is willing to stand behind the care that they and the entire staff offer.

Only a certain caliber of dentist has patients that underwent full mouth reconstruction (crowns/caps) over 30 years ago and that are still in great shape today. When dental work is performed at a higher level of excellence, and patients understand the value of excellent home care and consistent recare, a long-lasting and youthful smile is possible for a lifetime. Insurance companies will allow dentists to redo their work every five to seven years. Look at the financial savings when restorations do not have to be redone in over thirty years!

Ask yourself: Should dentists put their money where their mouth is? Do my family and I deserve excellence or mediocrity?

7. DO YOU HAVE A “NO WAITING” POLICY?

A recent patient survey reveals that what irritates patients the most is when they feel that their time is not being respected and that they have to spend an excessive amount of time in the waiting room.

An appointment is a meeting at a specific time that has been agreed upon by all involved parties. As is common with the medical industry today, this agreed upon time is usually met by only one of the parties. Doctors give patients a time to show up and wait with many others until they can see you.

Oftentimes a practice with one or two doctors has several people in the waiting room.

The dentist should respect the patient's time. If there is an appointment set for one o'clock in the afternoon, the dentist should be prepared to see you at one o'clock in the afternoon. The doctor and the dental practice in general should be very respectful of their patients' time, as they well deserve. All patients should be treated as a VIPs (very important patients). In fact, every staff member needs to know that without the patient, there is no paycheck. When a dentist respects a patient's time it is easier for the patient to respect the dentist's time by keeping appointments and arriving on time.

Ask yourself: Shouldn't my time be respected?

8. HOW DO YOU ENSURE MY COMFORT?

Something as simple as a family room atmosphere in the waiting room with its own flat screen television would be a good start to help patients relax. Maybe something to distract patients during treatment, like ceiling mounted monitors with headsets will help ensure comfort. It says a lot about the dentist that provides the means for patients to escape by listening to their favorite music, watching over 100 Direct-TV channels, or even enjoying the patients favorite DVD?

The dentist should make nitrous oxide available for patients who like the extra comfort. This "laughing gas" can take the edge off the most nervous of

patients. Because it's a gas, its effects are completely gone by the end of the appointment; therefore the patient does not need anybody to drive them home. For the extremely nervous, the dentist might prescribe a drug such as Valium to relax the patient. For extreme cases, there are dentists that specialize in full sedation, just like patients receive when undergoing major surgery.

As covered in the Go Ahead and Smile Free Dental Report Series *How Technology Provides Value & Comfort to Dentistry*, technology offers the dentist new and powerful tools to diagnose and treat various dental problems earlier, and with virtually no discomfort to the patient. For example, another added comfort for patients is the development of computer-controlled local anesthesia like the Compudent (The Wand) that allows for injections with virtually no discomfort.

In addition, another exciting area is air-abrasion. Air-abrasion allows the preparing of teeth for fillings without the need for anesthesia or a drill, eliminating another common fear of seeing the dentist. The device uses high airflow combined with small particles to remove decay without the need for conventional anesthetic or drill. Fillings are much smaller; therefore, they last longer and are of better value.

Ask yourself: How important is it to have a dentist that is genuinely concerned about reducing my fears and making every appointment as

comfortable as possible? How important is it to me to have the dentist use alternatives to the old-fashioned needle and dental drill?

9. DO YOU UTILIZE SOME FORM OF MAGNIFICATION TO ENSURE THE BEST POSSIBLE VISION?

Most dental schools are allowing future dentists to use magnification loupes for all of their dental procedures. Why? Because they can see the tooth two to three times larger, this can achieve a much higher level of patient care. If dental schools are teaching new dentists to use them, then why shouldn't all dentists follow suit? Truth is that many were not trained to do so, and they just continue practicing dentistry the same way they have been doing for the last twenty to forty years. Loupes alone do not represent a doctor's commitment to excellence, but it is a great benchmark.

Ask yourself: Does my care mandate the simple ability for the doctor to see at vast greater detail than the naked eye? Does this reflect the doctor's sincerity towards fulfilling my best treatment?

10. DO YOU USE A LASER CARIES DETECTOR?

The use of laser caries detectors enables much earlier detection of caries (cavities), allowing dentists to treat more conservatively. Smaller fillings cost less and last longer. This benefits the patient directly by delivering a better value, which is explained in more detail in the Go Ahead and Smile Free Dental Report Series *How Technology Provides Value & Comfort to Dentistry*.

It's absolutely vital that all the decayed tooth structure is removed. However, sometimes it's hard to tell the good tooth structure from the demineralized tooth structure (Dentin) even with the use of loupes and lighted mirrors. So the extra time to use a caries detection solution is necessary to make sure all decayed tooth structure is completely gone. If all the decay is not removed, the caries will continue. The old caries left behind might take several years to show up on x-rays, but it is there. This then requires yet another expense to redo the filling – or even worse, a root canal, core buildup and a crown. Nowadays, these procedures on just one back molar can cost the patient over \$2,000.

Ask yourself: Do I think it is important to seek out dentists that are using all the newest tools available to them? Does this save me money?

CONCLUSION

There are many questions to ask a prospective new dental office to ensure the best quality of health care. We have learned the importance of asking for qualifications and references and how patients can research some of that material on their own.

The doctor is the first one who should do the initial exam, not the hygienist. The initial exam should take an hour to allow time for the dentist to learn about the patients wants, desires, fears, and concerns.

We have also learned to ask questions to make certain that the prospective dentist is a mercury-free office, if they have patient education programs to help ensure effective treatment and overall patient value, and the importance of asking for all costs and financial options up front. Also, a good gauge of the caliber of talent of the dentist that you might choose, ask if they “guarantee” their work.

Find out from prospective dentists how they ensure your comfort. This can be accomplished in a variety of forms, from chair mounted monitors and flat screen TVs, to having a no waiting policy and being drill-free. It is also very important to find out if the dentist is capable of finding and seeing tooth decay with tools such as magnification loupes and caries detectors.

These are just some of the questions that should be answered by the prospective dental office so patients can make the best choice for their

healthcare. Maybe not all dental offices have all of the things mentioned in this report, but the more they do have the better care patients are likely to receive.

What at first glance may seem as an omission from this report might be a question for the dentist such as: Do you accept my HMO/PPO Dental plan? This is the most common question posed to dental offices, yet it is the most irrelevant. HMO/PPO Dental plans do not save patients money, and often times can cause the patient to spend too much money, time, and hassle for dental services. In the next installment of the Go Ahead and Smile Free Dental Report Series, *The Secrets of Dental HMO/PPO Plans That the Providers Don't Want You to Know*, this concept is explored in more detail.

A WORD FROM THE DOCTOR

Dear Reader:

Thank you for requesting this report. I have written it with the hope it gives you information you may not have known, and it will help you, the **Consumer**, choose the best dental team.

I hope you have found this article informative. Please keep it on file for your reference, or pass it along to a friend. You can find other reports such as *How Technology Adds Value & Comfort to Dentistry*, *The Secrets of Dental HMO/PPO Plans That the Providers Don't Want You to Know*, and more at our Web site, www.goaheadandsmile.com.

Please send me an email at drt@goaheadandsmile.com if you have other questions or have comments on anything you have read. I would also like to hear from you if this article was helpful.

Hoping The Best For You And Your Family,

Dr. Ed Trizzino

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