

Higher Tech, Lower Fees

by Wm. J. Schlotz, D.D.S.



Healthcare costs have zoomed their way to a hyper-inflated state in the recent past. Don't blame your friendly, neighborhood dentist (or Lasik provider - see my last column "Cost Sensitive" archived at TheConservativeDentist.com), however. While healthcare costs skyrocket, some dental fees are actually on the decline.

This is quite a feat considering the escalation of dental input costs. Pro-inflationary cost items include legal-protective measures not at all worried about when I was in dental school 20 yrs. ago. Dentists now need to write an essay for after-treatment notes and patients are given consent forms for care as simple as teeth whitening. Raw material costs seem to march inexorably higher. I'm getting an urge to use gold futures as a hedge to my practice.

Moreover, relatively recent OSHA mandates and infection control standards, beneficial as they are, have helped push costs higher by maybe 20-30% or more (my estimate). Handpiece (drill) sterilization is a case in point. Most (sadly, not all) dentists steam sterilize handpieces after every procedure in 2009. Seems like a common sense, safe practice. However, go back not very long ago (5 years maybe) and probably the majority of dentists did not steam sterilize them (the breakdown rate is drastically higher with the high heat and moisture). Our health (and handpiece manufacturers) gain is a loss dollar-wise for the patient.

Today, even with the higher costs of providing care, some types of dental technology and techniques are emerging to help decrease dental fees. "One-Visit Crowns" highlight choices available to dentists and, by extension, to dental patients (if they are properly informed). Essentially, if a dentist wants to provide quality crowns-in-a-day, they can choose between Cerec and Belleglass (brand names).

Both are durable, high quality restorations bonded to protect teeth. In fact, both manufacturers claim hardness to be unusually close to human enamel. Importantly to me, both can be used minimally invasively (Belleglass more so). Cerec is glitzier, has more marketing and employs the use of a snazzy milling machine where patients can watch their crown being cut (car washes blazed this trail). It also can cost the dentist upwards of 130k (give or take, certainly more take than give). Belleglass employs a new age, high-pressure nitrogen cured resin. Bells, whistles (and the show) are lacking, but so is the cost (less than 10k) to the DDS.

Cost (or savings) pass-through to patients, then, is obvious. Cerec-type crown fees, not surprisingly, grow higher. Yet, Here's a Reason to Smile....Belleglass, my preference, has enabled a fee reduction of 30% (from usual and customary) in this practice's geography.

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