



POSTCARD FROM AMERICA

We go Stateside as hygienist and founder of DentalBuzz.com, Trish Walraven, paints a picture

I live in Texas, and work in a box. Well, not really. But at the same time, *really!* This box, like most boxes, has four walls. There's a ceiling and a floor, too, but those aren't what drive this story. It's all about the walls. When I look at the walls, instead of trying to climb one (or get driven up one!) my inner designer starts its analysis. What decorations help to make this box more enjoyable? Most importantly, there's a patient in the centre of my box.

Sky blue

So there's a sky blue wall behind me as I'm facing the patient. This is the dental hygienist scope of practice in the state of Texas. You'll notice the sleek steel shelf hung firmly on that wall that lets me provide all hygiene services – even when the doctor is away. On that shelf are my preventive allowances: pit and fissure sealants, fluoride treatments, periodontal therapy, temporary fillings, restoration polishing, and even a flashing snowglobe of laser-assisted bacterial decontamination. This wall is also marked by an ugly patched-up area. If you pulled off the patch, you'd find a pretty big hole, left by a restriction that the Texas laws place on the administration of local anaesthesia by hygienists. Texas is in that 10% of the US where a handful of Board dentists hold the rest of their profession hostage with this issue. It seems to deflect attention from those other efforts that will give hygienists better governance over their work lives but, for now, it is difficult to get the laws changed in favour of hygienists. The patch is cool, though. It's made up of an intense pharmacy-compounded topical gel that I use on my patient when she needs scaling and root planing. It's not perfect, but it does keep the dentist from having to stop what he's doing to anaesthetise her, and she loves that there is no post-injection pain and lingering numbness afterwards.

Hot pink clock

Which brings me to the second wall: a green-means-go fluorescent mural featuring a hot pink clock. It flashes the amount of time I have with my patient: 30 minutes! And that's if she's on periodontal maintenance or has staining. If she's healthy or a child the clock starts ticking at 20.



Everything mounted to this wall is geared towards squeezing the most out of every moment. Ultrasonic tips? The thinnest, curviest ones available, and enjoyed even by my youngest patient because they knock off every bit of calculus and plaque at a range of comfortable settings. Baking soda et polisher? Much faster than the rotary polishing cup and paste. Oral hygiene advice? Suggested as I'm performing the initial examination and demonstrated later with a hand-held mirror and floss. Assistants instantly appear to chart and record probing depths with the click of a mouse, loupes and a headlamp keep me from having to reach up and change the overhead light position. I am a master of efficiency.

Subtle shade of green

The third wall is a more subtle shade of green. It's the one with all the niches and windows, with family photos and favourite mementos left by patients. I love this wall the most because it lets me see the world outside. One of the windows faces the reception room. The room is empty – not because we don't have patients, but because none of my patients ever have to wait there, thanks to a well-coordinated team using custom-designed communication with audible BlueNotes that chime as soon as a treatment room is open, or when a patient arrives, or when the dentist needs supplies because of an unanticipated event. This kind of empty reception room can be found in all corners of the world. Many practices are now implementing this idea – a spark that

Trish Walraven graduated from Texas Woman's University with a bachelor's degree in dental hygiene and has worked full-time in private practice for 20 years. She is owner of DentalBuzz.com, a humour and dental trends website, and a co-developer of the BlueNote Software intra-office dental communication programme.

came out of my brain and then became a computer programme. I am proud of helping to shape the world outside my box.

Metallic gold

The final wall is painted metallic gold, with the words 'Preferred Provider' stencilled in black all along the baseboards. From this wall emerges a door into a second operatory where a dedicated hygiene assistant is waiting with my next patient. I'll see him and then move back in here once my services are complete. I'll also use my diagnostic skills to let the patient know the doctor will be recommending a crown on one tooth, a bridge in the opposite quadrant. Focusing on treatment plan acceptance and dollars on the doctor's bottom line is how I make up for the 30% or more discount patients receive in this middle tier of managed care here in the US. And it's how I earn all those glittery stars on the wall: my home, a car, vacation time, designer handbags. I like my box just fine. But if I had my own way, the walls would be different. Maybe they would all be windows. **DH&T**