

Singing dentist helps patients erase fears

Continued from Page 1
able, helpful and educational as possible.

FEAR AND annoyance is something Van Horn understands. After all, she had a bad experience herself with a dentist when she was younger. That did it. She switched to a different dentist and in the process found a mentor for her own career.

"He was very gentle. He gave painless injections. I switched from someone who did dentistry the old-fashioned way to someone who did it the modern way."

Music had nothing to do with Van Horn becoming a dentist. She loved sciences and health care — and art.

"There's a lot of artistry in dentistry," said Van Horn, the mother of two children.

That may surprise a lot of patients. But as Van Horn tells it, filling a cavity or making crowns or bridges is really a lot like sculpting.

With a filling you've got to make sure the lines and curves fit the bite and other teeth. With crowns and bridges the art is making them look natural.

What Van Horn follows — and asks her five-member staff to do the same — is that her patients are the most important people in the world.

"I always try to remember that I would want to be able to sit in this chair and be a patient in my own office," said Van Horn, who has practiced in Farmington Hills since 1982.

That's why making the patient

comfortable and relaxed is so important to Van Horn. "It's not fun when it hurts patients or it's hard on them. I get a lot of satisfaction of helping patients over the fear."

OUTSIDE HER office on 13 Mile, just west of North Farmington High School, Van Horn has a neon toothbrush designating her practice. When you walk into her waiting and patient rooms, you won't see sterile white walls.

"I designed the office to be relaxing. Instead of being sterile I picked colors that are calming," said the solo-practitioner. The wallpapers, for example, have shades of pink — a color that many believe is calming.

But she goes even further. Since the only thing most dentistry patients see is the ceiling, Van Horn has pictures on the ceiling above the patient chairs. She also uses headphones so patients can listen to music. Visualization techniques come in handy, too.

"I think a lot of it is the sound," Van Horn said, speaking of the traditional fear of going to the dentist. It's the sound of the equipment, particularly the drill, that can get a lot of patients' fear and anxiety levels cracking.

More important than the surroundings, Van Horn believes a dentist must communicate thoroughly with the patient. It's not her style to walk into the patient room after the hygienist and other staff members

'I've never really had anyone surprised by it. I think I can sing OK. I've had compliments so I don't think I'm bad. I take requests.'

— Dr. Rhonda Van Horn

have been in. It's not her style to talk only when it has to do with teeth. And it's not her style to order directives to the patients.

"I have more of a discussion with the patient rather than, 'this is what you need and this is how much it's going to cost,'" she said.

Humor is also a handy tool for Van Horn. Over the years, she's developed a sense of timing with her jokes. Patients call from their homes and offices with jokes for Van Horn to use. But no dentist jokes please. She's tried to hard to overcome the negative image of the dentist.

"Consider what a dentist does. We are really violating people's spaces. That's not something that can be taken lightly. My consistent philosophy is that we have to be upbeat. Any little thing we can do will help. We try to personalize the care."

THAT INCLUDES starting off the dentist-patient relationship with mulling a health history questionnaire home. Her staff also researches insurance benefits for the patient. Complete care is another one of Van Horn's philosophies.

She checks a patient for just about everything, including head and neck cancer and mouth lesions, muscles

and joints in the face and jaw. And that's not to mention the filling of any new cavities.

She also measures the gums around each tooth and if appropriate takes models or photographs of teeth. While she's doing all this, Van Horn believes it's important to explain to the patient what she's doing and why. Then she'll talk about cleaning your teeth. And she'll explain the costs.

"I talk to the patient first. That way they hear it all from the primary provider," Van Horn said.

And then while you're sitting there, out come a few bars of one of Van Horn's many favorites songs. Or she'll just sing along with the radio.

"I've never really had anyone surprised by it. I think I can sing OK. I've had compliments so I don't think I'm bad."

In case you're wondering though, this is no run-of-the-mill shower singer. Van Horn is in the church choir and her musical resume includes the piano and clarinet and a stint in a jazz band.

"I take requests."



SHARON LEMELUX/Staff photographer
Rhonda Van Horn's son, Sean, spends time after school in his mom's office.

'Company' helps Marian

Stephen Sondhelm's show "Company" will be presented at 3 p.m. Sunday at Cranbrook's St. Dunstan's Theater.

The show is being sponsored by the Marian Alumnae Association. Tickets are \$25, and proceeds benefit the Dolores Chapman Memorial Scholarship Fund. The scholarship is

given to a Marian High School sophomore.

For tickets write to the alumnae association office, 7225 Lahser Road, Bloomfield Hills 48301. Tickets will be at the box office or can be purchased at the door.

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