

MORE THAN HEALTHY TEETH





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Smile Solutions is a multidisciplinary dental practice providing high-quality dental care to over 65,000 patients in Melbourne's CBD and surrounds. It started in 1993 with just eight patients. In the intervening years, it has grown exponentially to become the industry leader it is today.

Dr Kia Pajouhesh, the owner and founder of Smile Solutions, started his career in 1992 as a young graduate from Melbourne University's dental school. "I began working as an associate dentist in a large practice in Collins Street," he says. "I'd been there for a year and a half when I set my sights on building my own practice."

It would be a dental practice with a unique focus. Dr Pajouhesh had a particular vision in mind for Smile Solutions. "I aspired to

provide the treatment that our patients seek rather than the treatment we believe our patients need.”

A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE

True to this aspiration, Smile Solutions treats patients to an experience that goes above and beyond the already-high dental standards prevailing in Australia.

“From day one,” says Dr Pajouhesh, “we looked at other local practices, businesses and clinics and saw where they could be improved upon. All the differences we prided ourselves on were small solutions that included learning from other people’s mistakes.”

One immediately apparent point of difference lies in the feeling a patient has on entering Smile Solutions. “The space ought not to feel clinical or cold,” says Dr Pajouhesh. “We went about setting up rooms that didn’t seem like dental rooms.”

“As a Smile Solutions patient, you walk into a space that is welcoming. It has none of the sounds of the dental drill, the clashing of instruments, the smells of dental preparations. We light scented candles and provide relaxing visuals.”

But welcoming doesn’t have to mean over the top or expensive. “We try to provide a high level of care in surroundings that are





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awe-inspiring – yet still keep our fees in the range most people can afford.”

“Our home is the Manchester Unity Building. In this Melbourne landmark, we’ve brought together two worlds by establishing a contemporary dental practice in heritage-listed, art deco spaces. In terms of the business model, it’s unmatched; there is no other like it in Australia.”

The practice is also set apart by its use of technology. It utilises sophisticated dental tools for all its procedures – including porcelain fillings, laser dentistry and sleep dentistry. “Right now, we are investigating a product called the DentalVibe,” says Dr Pajouhesh. “It is a mechanism that allows us to give injections without discomfort.”

But by far the strongest point of difference is Smile Solutions’ unique provision of multidisciplinary dental care under one roof, which means patients don’t have to leave the building to access the services of specialists as well as general dentists. Smile Solutions’ eighteen specialists, all registered with the Dental Board of Australia, cover the six main fields of dental specialisation: paedodontics, orthodontics, endodontics, prosthodontics, periodontics, and oral & maxillofacial surgery, making the practice a genuine one-stop

“shop”.

“This full spectrum of services means that our patients don’t need to spend time hopping from one practice to another to get optimal care from a range of clinicians,” says Dr Pajouhesh. “And our clinicians are in constant face-to-face communication with each other and drawing on the same clinical evidence, such as X-rays and data. It is like a mini public hospital in the dental sector.”

THE SMILE THAT BONDS

Another key factor that sets Smile Solutions apart is the calibre and commitment of its staff. Early on, Dr Pajouhesh realised the importance of giving personnel ample opportunity to blossom and flourish within the dental practice. This would not only maximise job satisfaction but minimise staff turnover.

“The biggest challenge faced by smaller clinical practices,” says Dr Pajouhesh, “is that staff can only pursue career advancement by leaving, and this causes a detrimental brain drain. You need to provide within the practice career opportunities that are superior to what they would find elsewhere.”

The growth offered to employees within the Smile Solutions business is not just on

a career-advancement level but also on a job satisfaction level and a financial remuneration level as well. "We run an open and transparent business," says Dr Pajouhesh. "We expose the facts to all our staff. For example, the remuneration of our staff is transparent to all – they need to know the amount of money they each earn, and how to get to the next level."

Dr Pajouhesh is also a firm believer in the power of relaxed staff meetings, generously appointed staff facilities, and a planned social calendar so that friendships may form

within the working environment. He's encouraged by the fact that a good proportion of his people are each other's "best mates".

A similar bond of loyalty has developed between Smile Solutions and its suppliers. While the practice has burgeoned over the years, with over 27 dental chairs now in operation on any given day, many of the suppliers are the same ones that supplied materials and equipment in the early days of just one dental chair.

Yet it is the patients who benefit most from these personal relations that Dr Pa-

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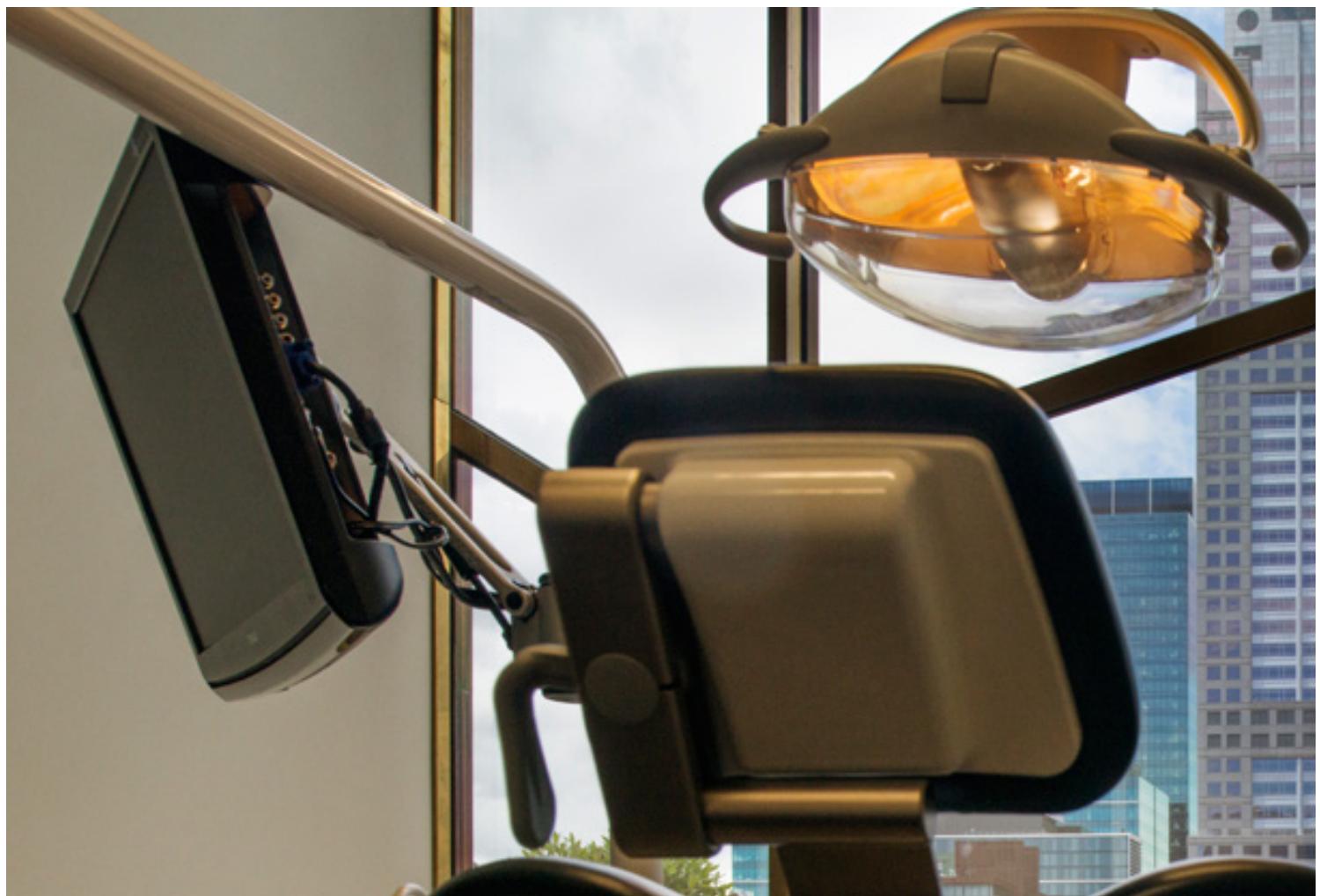


-jouhesh has nurtured. As a dentist himself, Dr Pajouhesh says that he always struggled with the notion of the traditional practitioner–patient relationship. “Twenty to 25 years ago, it was all about telling patients what they needed,” he says. “Patients experienced pain and were berated. Clinicians were not apologetic.”

Dr Pajouhesh expands the point: “I struggled with this notion and decided the experience needed to be a service – a service where patients can choose between clinicians and are not told what to have. Many patients are

becoming more educated and aware, doing their own research about health conditions, and I believe they need to be provided with ample options and given a framework within which they can make choices.” Smile Solutions, by contrast with traditional practices, allows the patient to be served “in a dynamic, comfortable and nurturing manner with the best technology, in the best surroundings, by the best clinicians”.

Back when Dr Pajouhesh started, there was a trend for companies to publish six-page mission statements to showcase their



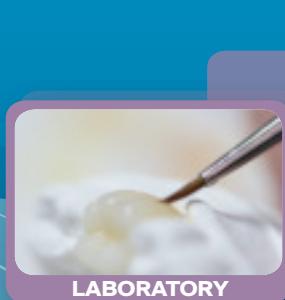
vision and pursuits. This inspired him to create instead a succinct practice philosophy of just a few words and display it in the reception area. The now-legendary Smile Solutions philosophy strives to return to the basics of human relations: to pursue excellence in quality of care; to overcome communication barriers; and to encourage clinicians to see things through the patient's eyes instead of their own.

"The last of the three elements – viewing the patient's needs and expectations through their eyes instead of our own – is the most

important," says Dr Pajouhesh. "It is a complete turnaround to the dentistry being provided in the 1980s and before that. In the 90s, I reversed that by always asking the patients who came into our clinic the same question – 'How can I be of service to you?'"

"We are always working with the patient to initiate change and empower them to envision better oral care and oral health, but it is a process," he adds. "Initially, it is about understanding their needs and tailor-making your treatment to meet their needs. But things have changed greatly in other health

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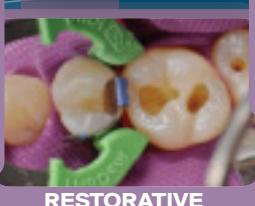
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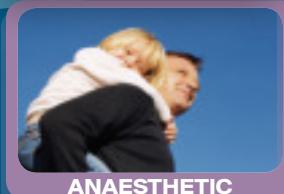
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industries as well. And obviously we see it in the alternative medical areas: in alternative medicine, the clinicians are open to hearing expectations, and the old-school doctor has had to drop his or her shield of righteousness and lend a genuine ear to the patient.”

NO GAPS IN SERVICE

In the 2014 Australian Business Awards, one of the three awards Smile Solutions received was for service excellence – an endorsement of which Dr Pajouhesh is cautiously proud.

“Service Excellence is a big term and it is all encompassing,” he says. “You have to get so many aspects of your business right in order to be given the accolade of service excellence. There are a lot of stages that culminate in that excellence.”

“Service is like the cherry on top of the dessert. But if you’re dining in a restaurant, and paying for your meal and deserving the best, the cherry is just that: the pinnacle of the gastronomic experience. Before you get to the cherry, there is the underlying experience – the restaurant space, the chairs, the



tables, the napery, cutlery and dinnerware, the ingredients, the skill of the chef, the presentation, the attitude of the waiting staff, the background music, the aroma of the dessert on delivery to the table – not to mention your expectations of how it will taste. The cherry is the crowning glory of the dessert, the last thing added by the chef. But it can also be the first thing you put in your mouth, and that might just be how you judge the total experience.”

The metaphor is engaging.

“What is more challenging,” adds Dr Pa-

jouhesh, signalling a firm sense of what matters, “is that if that dessert comes at the end of a lacklustre main course, you will find it problematic to consider that dessert to be good.”

As Dr Pajouhesh sees it, service excellence in his industry derives from a complex network of structures. Many patients first discover Smile Solutions via the website or hear about the practice from a colleague or friend, then have their first encounter with the real thing by telephone and end up taking their experience as far as post-operative care.



In between, patients are treated by numerous support staff and clinical staff discussing treatments, payment options and service.

“It involves so many aspects of care provision,” says Dr Pajouhesh. “It also puts our key people in the position of providing a patient with an experience that is well worth their money, time and energy, making the practice worth visiting again... and again.”

“You want people to be telling friends, which brings us word-of-mouth referrals and makes up most of our business. It is a big process though, and you can’t take it lightly. You could get 99 per cent of it right, then get one thing wrong and end up losing the patient altogether. So we have to make sure that every minute detail of the patient experience is attended to at a level that surpasses consumer expectations, or at the very least meets them. Otherwise the ‘cherry’ is of no consequence.”

A FUTURE TO GRIN AT

The Australian Business Award for Service Excellence reminds Dr Pajouhesh and the Smile Solutions team that they are doing work they can be proud of. “When all is said and done, you can pat yourself on the back for the level of satisfaction you have provided to people,” he says. “It gives you a sense

of legacy and achievement. Over our journey so far, we have managed to be part of a great service and to give a sense of satisfaction to the people we care for.”

Looking towards the future, Dr Pajouhesh sees the company’s next challenge as two-fold. “Firstly, we have to maintain our current standards,” he says. “Service is already at such a high level. Maintaining it will be hard work: we cannot take it for granted that our service excellence will hold if we take our eye off the ball.”

The second part of the challenge is more adventurous and innovative from a business expansion point of view. Dr Pajouhesh wants to grow the business so that people outside the city of Melbourne will have access to Smile Solutions.

“Some patients choose not to travel to Melbourne for dental care,” says Dr Pajouhesh. “And if we can’t get them to come to Rome, we have to take Rome to them. We have to go down the path of providing them with our excellent service in their own neighbourhood.”



