

# Dental Sleep Medicine: The “New Porcelain Veneer”?



Larry Barsh,  
DMD

Dentistry has always been called upon to be aware of the relationship of oral health to systemic health. The physician's long-standing request of patients to “stick out your tongue” was, and is, an indication of how many disease entities are reflected in oral tissues. Now with obesity and diabetes reaching epidemic proportions in the United States, dentistry is asked once more to screen their patients—this time for snoring and sleep apnea.

However, this time it is different because dentistry can play a major role in the treatment and management of a medical problem with an intraoral solution. And, in the process, create a practice growth strategy in a depressed economy.

In the last years of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, dentistry embraced the need for everyone to have straight, white teeth. Soon, every dentist became a “cosmetic specialist,” often to the detriment of other parts of their prac-

tice. Cosmetic dentistry became the driving force of practice growth.

However, when it comes to practice viability in 2009, veneers, bleaching, and other cosmetic services cannot always be relied on to produce sustainable practice growth. Discretionary dollars are being spent on food, mortgage, car payments, and clothing. Many cosmetic-based practices are experiencing severe economic slow-downs.

## THE RE-EMERGENCE OF A HEALTH CENTERED PRACTICE

Dentistry is at the beginning of an unprecedented era, where dentists are being called upon to diagnose and treat certain systemic diseases. Research articles devoted to the role that periodontal disease plays in inflammation and endothelial dysfunction leading to heart disease and stroke abound. Panoramic radiographs can indicate the possibility of stroke from carotid occlusion, and so on.

Sleep apnea is associated with heart disease, sudden cardiac death, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, obesity, depression, and even erectile dys-

*Now with obesity and diabetes reaching epidemic proportions in the United States, dentistry is asked once more to screen their patients....*

function. The excessive daytime sleepiness associated with the frequent awakenings of sleep apnea has been the cause of thousands of motor vehicle accidents and indicted in major disasters. Snoring itself has recently been cited as a causative factor for stroke. Because of the severity of the medical problems, every dentist, at the very least, should be prepared to screen patients for snoring and sleep apnea.

## SNORING, SLEEP APNEA, AND YOUR PRACTICE

For those doctors who are willing to take the time and effort to study sleep medicine, the recognition

*continued on page 14*