

# Creating an Environmentally Sound Dental Practice

A Discussion With Fred Pockrass, DDS\* and Ina Pockrass, JD†

Have you ever thought about the amount of waste that is generated in a typical day in a typical dental office? Everything from plastic chair covers and paper sterilization bags to x-ray development chemicals and amalgam waste is often dumped into landfills and water supplies.<sup>1</sup> Just as the public is increasingly aware of the impact human beings have on the planet, a growing number of dental professionals are asking how they can be part of the solution. The *Journal of Practical Hygiene* discusses this topic with Drs. Fred and Ina Pockrass, creators of Transcendentist, an environmentally friendly dental practice in Berkeley, California.

## JPH: Why was Transcendentist created?

**A:** We created Transcendentist to support this leading edge in the profession. In 2003, we built our practice by considering the impact on the environment of every choice we made, before the current “green” trend. The Bay Area Green Business program noticed our efforts and used our innovations to help set the standards for how dental offices can be more environmentally sound.<sup>2</sup> We were then certified as an official “Green Business”—the first such dental office in the country.<sup>3</sup>

## JPH: How has Transcendentist impacted other dental offices?

**A:** There are now five dental offices in the Bay Area that are green-certified businesses, and there is a rapidly growing network of green health and wellness practitioners.<sup>2</sup> We are also getting inquiries from dental offices and dental students in New York, Minneapolis, Canada, Australia, and even Portugal, asking how they can “green” their practices.

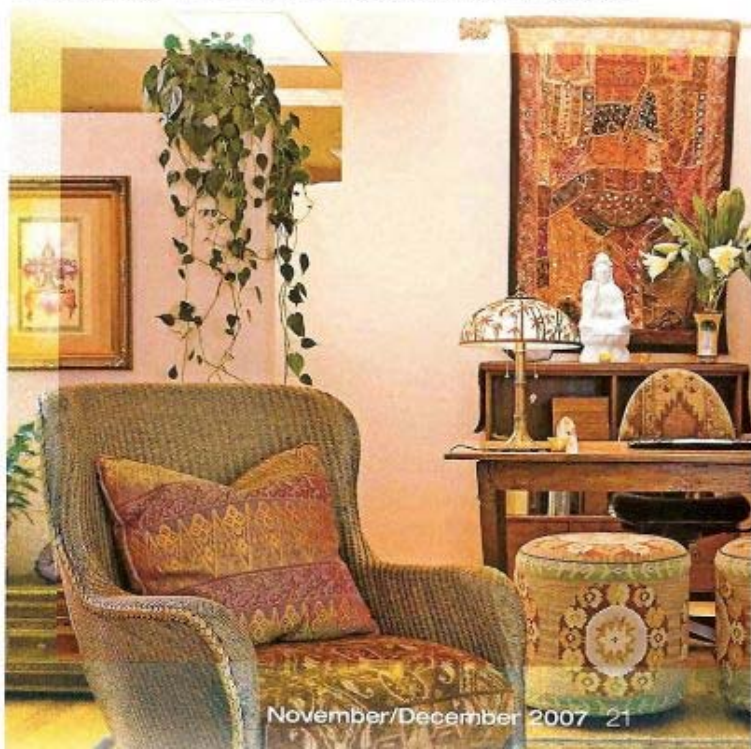
**Figure.** The spa-like waiting room at Transcendentist helps patients feel peaceful and comfortable, while showing that “green” does not have to be bland and boring.

## JPH: What is the patient experience at an environmentally friendly practice?

**A:** The waiting area feels more like a spa or your best friend’s living room, as opposed to a typical dental waiting area (Figure). We use natural fabrics like cotton, furniture made of recycled woods, and living plants to oxygenate the air.

In the operatories, there are cloth headrest covers and patient “bibs,” which are washed and dried on site using environmentally friendly machines and detergents, as well as cloth sterilization towels made especially for us. To reduce pollutants and waste, we use steam-based sterilization, special air-filtration units, digital imaging, and paperless patient charting. After prophylaxis, our hygienists offer clients an essential oil-infused mouthwash,<sup>4</sup> which comes in a ceramic cup and is washed in an energy-efficient dishwasher.

Patients have access to a blood test that assesses biocompatibility with more than 6,300 dental materials.<sup>4</sup>



Restorative materials (ie, belleGlass, KerrLab, Orange, CA; IPS Empress, Tetric Ceram, Ivoclar Vivadent, Amherst, NY; Captek, Precious Chemicals, Altamonte Springs, FL) are used, all of which have a high incidence of biocompatibility.



**JPH:** How did you convert to a “green” practice?

**A:** Energy-efficient fluorescent lights were installed throughout the office, along with the installation of an amalgam separator. The separator captures old mercury-containing fillings before they get into the water supply. We then contracted with a company to dispose of the waste in an environmentally sound manner. The walls were painted with a product that does not contain “volatile organic compounds,” and at night, computer monitors and the HVAC system are turned off. In addition, we offset the electricity used in our office by purchasing wind-power credits. Laboratory boxes are reused, not thrown away, and recyclables are separated from the trash. We also retained a top OSHA consultant to ensure that our methods comply with health and safety standards.

**JPH:** How have your patients reacted to this “green” office model?

**A:** While our clients appreciated our environmental commitment in 2003–2004, it was not the primary draw. Now, clients are coming to us because of our environmental stewardship and client-centered approach; we attract between 30 and 40 new clients each month, and do virtually no traditional marketing.

**JPH:** What do you think contributed to this positive patient response?

**A:** As individuals become more aware of global climate changes, we are finding that they are increasingly looking for new ways to protect the environment and their families. One way for individuals to take an initiative is choosing an environmentally sound dental office. There is a substantial number of these individuals, which is continuously growing. They are members of the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) market, which supports healthcare practitioners embodying environmental values.<sup>5</sup> The LOHAS market is estimated at one-third of the US population, about 60 to 70 million Americans. In 2005, more than \$40 billion was spent on “alternative” healthcare such as acupuncture and chiropractics.<sup>6</sup> We believe that “green” dental offices have tremendous advantages with these consumers.

**JPH:** How have you been promoting eco-friendly dental offices?

**A:** We are currently launching the Eco-Dentistry Association<sup>7</sup> to support dental offices seeking to “green” their practices. This association offers technical assistance, products, and information. We envision a community of like-minded dental professionals who will have a forum to share best practices. Instead of dental offices having to reinvent the wheel, we will support their transformation to more sustainable practices, and support their patient care objectives. We know that hygienists, who have long been at the center of dental well-being, will embrace the opportunity to be at the forefront of this new wave. □

## References

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