



# Open wide, say zzzzzz

For the nervous dental patient, or those who simply cannot sit still, there is an alternative to anxiety or a general anaesthetic. **Cathy Saunders** reports on a trend towards intravenous sedation in dentistry.

People whose knuckle-whitening fear of the dentist has kept them from seeking treatment for years are turning to an option known as sleep or sedation dentistry.

According to Perth dental surgeon Misagh Habibi, who is one of only a handful in WA trained in intravenous sedation, most of his patients suffer from some level of dental phobia or anxiety.

"I have seen some come in crying or need someone to actually walk them into the room," Dr Habibi says.

Many who previously would or could have treatment only under a general anaesthetic are saving money and hospital theatre time by choosing the sedation technique that is carried out in the dentist's chair.

Also dubbed twilight sedation, the process involves the intravenous administration of a combination of sedative and pain-relieving drugs which sends the patient into a dream-like state of deep relaxation and sleep.

Dr Habibi says dental phobia is common, with patients cowed by the fear of the drill, needles or memories of an unpleasant childhood dental experience, embarrassment over a strong gag reflex, or even just dislike of the surgical smell of the dentist's workplace.

In extreme cases, some have not been to a dentist for 30 years or more. "Sometimes these patients can be lucky and not have terrible oral disease but often they have gone through years of pain and problems

with eating, problems with their smiles and loss of self-esteem and confidence," Dr Habibi says.

Some patients who opt for sedation dentistry simply have problems keeping their mouth open, while others cannot sit still comfortably in the dental chair long enough for a procedure to be carried out.

And some, who need multiple appointments, are simply short of time and opt to get them over with in a single sitting.

The procedures performed under sedation include general dentistry, oral surgery and cosmetic makeovers that may involve gum sculpting, crowns, veneers and bridgework.

Traditionally a lot of dentists have used general anaesthetics when dealing with phobic patients but it can be hard to come by hospital bookings for elective dental treatment.

A general anaesthetic is often not available for many of the procedures that lend themselves to IV sedation, such as fillings and standard dental preventive care, especially when patients require hours of treatment.

The cost is cheaper than for a general anaesthetic, for which the patient's fees include the hospital theatre booking and the anaesthetist as well as the dentist. On average, the cost of a general is at least double that of providing sedation.

IV sedation is not covered by Medicare but some health funds give a rebate.

Sedation can be useful for all patients when it comes to certain

procedures because, as Dr Habibi admits, no patient likes the sight of the surgical drill, scalpel or needle.

However, being phobic doesn't automatically qualify a candidate for IV sedation. Patient selection is a careful process to ensure patient safety, and some people are deemed not suitable for the procedure. The procedure and the patient's weight, medical status, and age are some of the factors taken into account.

Some medical problems such as obstructive sleep apnoea, unmanaged hypertension or angina usually preclude IV sedation.

"The dentist also needs to be skilled at managing a sedated patient, so it helps if they do it routinely," Dr Habibi says.

Although IV sedation by its very nature requires the insertion of a needle, Dr Habibi says there are ways of helping the patient overcome their fear.

"A gentle touch and approach, the support of the staff and sometimes a family member, verbal reassurance, positive affirmation and hypnotic principles all help," he says. And the very fine needle is inserted only momentarily to introduce the IV cannula. "It is just a really tiny scratch and for some patients who are really worried about that, we give them an anaesthetic patch to wear over their arm an hour beforehand," he explains.

One of the uppermost questions for patients is "Will I be awake?"

According to Dr Habibi, the technique sends them into a really deep and relaxing sleep.



“Nobody feels conscious because they are dissociated from their experience,” he says. “We call it conscious sedation because we keep the patient vaguely responsive to verbal command, and they fully maintain their own breathing, whereas in a general anaesthetic they are often being ventilated by a machine.”

Supplemental oxygen is given through the nose while the dentist works in the mouth and throughout the process the sedationist monitors the patient, including their breathing, blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen saturation.

Patients don't remember the dental experience or any dreams they may have had once they come out of the sedation.

The chief but rare side-effect is mild nausea.

“We sedate each patient carefully according to their individual response and this approach means they don't develop post-operative nausea anywhere as often as with a general anaesthetic,” Dr Habibi says.

The turnaround in attitude by

patients who have shunned appointments for years can be startling and many patients will return for preventive care such as cleaning and standard dental work and not require sedation.

The process is in such demand that Dr Habibi will often do up to six sedations a day.

Last year, with the assistance of Dr Habibi, the Oral Health Centre of WA (OHCWA) established an IV sedation clinic for public dental patients using set-up funding from the State Government in a bid to save valuable theatre time used for non-complex cases and eliminate the unnecessary risk taken by phobic patients having a general anaesthetic.

It is estimated that up to 10 per cent of public patients who undergo a general anaesthetic at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital for oral surgery are referred there because they have dental phobia while others have it for uncomplicated treatment because they cannot sit still for long enough.

Australian Dental Association federal president Neil Hewson says IV sedation is ideal for such people.

“It is really good for people who

are extremely nervous or who might be special needs patients or where their behaviour is such that they couldn't sit in a chair and have a local anaesthetic,” Dr Hewson says.

“And it does make access to care a little more affordable for people.”

OCHWA head Paul Abbott says another option for some patients is relative analgesia, which is nitrous oxide or laughing gas.

“That is good for some people but not enough for others to stop the fear,” Professor Abbott says.

“The next step would be IV sedation or (else a) general anaesthetic, which is obviously risky and a lot more expensive, whether it is private practice or public dentistry.”

In Australia, training in IV sedation is carried out only at Sydney University in conjunction with Westmead Hospital, where qualified dentists can gain a graduate diploma in clinical dentistry (conscious sedation and pain control).

It is approved by the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists.



Relaxed: Franki Randall prepares for an intravenous sedation session with Dr Habibi. Picture: Dione Davidson



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## From crippling fear to a customer for life

Until recently, Burns Beach resident Franki Randall had only been to the dentist once in 32 years, having suffered an extreme fear of dentists and drills since the age of 15.

"I think I had a lot of unnecessary work done by a bad dentist when I was in England," she explains, adding that the treatment meant she lost several teeth.

"I was subjected to a dental hospital where the trainee dentists went and I had a lot of work done without local anaesthetic and without a choice, and it bloody hurt.

"I felt every bit of it and it got to the point where I couldn't even sit in the chair."

Despite her phobia, toothache finally drove her to a dentist six years ago. "I had one tiny filling and he did it but it still hurt me, so from then on I was too petrified to go back."

But six years on, severe dental pain and the fear of losing another tooth sent her searching on the internet for a dentist who used anaesthesia in the surgery and she stumbled across Dr Misagh Habibi's name.

"I had got to a really pathetic stage and even when I went to see him, I was shaking, I was in tears, I couldn't even talk to him," she says.

Ms Randall, a former nurse, was convinced to try treatment under IV sedation. But she was still doubtful.

"If he had been more than two minutes' late, I was out the door, I couldn't remain in there," she says.

"He did about an hour-and-a-half's worth of work."

The experience was a far cry from what she had feared.

"It was just fantastic," she says. "I only remember him putting the injection in my arm.

"I am not scared of needles and I am not scared of pain, I am only scared of dentists," she says.

The experience with IV sedation has changed her view to such an extent that she will willingly return to Dr Habibi's surgery for treatment.

"I am a customer for life," she says.