



Tooth bleaching— Increasing patients’ dental awareness

Oral disease has been a problem for humans from the beginning of mankind. Soon after dentistry developed, this medical discipline has aimed to restore patients' teeth, and it is generally accepted that successful functional rehabilitation and quality of life go hand in hand. Meanwhile, dentistry has evolved into an omnibus field covering several aspects of health and life science. Re-establishing function nowadays is possible in consideration of cosmetic demands, and esthetic dentistry has become an exciting new frontier in our profession. Indeed, this is not a paradigm shift, but only an enhancement clearly meeting the needs of our patients. Mimicking nature more closely to reality, preferably by means of minimally invasive techniques, is beneficial; however, maintaining high-quality preventive efforts is of paramount importance when trying to achieve optimal oral health and, thus, long-term success of our work.

No doubt, an attractive smile is an important social asset and is desired by all cultures, generations, and genders. In this context, tooth bleaching has gained enormous popularity, due in part to its nonsurgical approach and reinforcement by various archetype beauties our patients model themselves on. Consequently, any product appealing to our patients' vanity should sell well, and me-too (home and in-office) bleaching products trying to participate in this big business have been successfully introduced. Concomitantly, over-the-counter bleaching products have become available for our patients' disposal. However, these products do differ with respect to their ingredients, and this will result in subtle distinctions regarding efficacy and side-effects.

Sometimes patients requesting whiter teeth seem more worried about the appearance of their teeth than their general oral health. How should we deal with this attitude? Undoubtedly, the desire to bleach one's own teeth is precipitated by

some kind of dental awareness; this should be the first step to improved levels of oral health. For umpteenth years, has not much of our preventive advice fallen upon deaf ears? Bleaching could increase our patients' awareness of oral hygiene—hence, this treatment option would be a means to an end. New challenges and patient management issues are appearing on the horizon, and these go beyond the strictly disease-related therapies of the past.

Tooth bleaching usually is based upon hydrogen peroxide as the active agent. The latter may be applied directly or will be decomposed from carbamide peroxide, which has formerly been used as a disinfectant and currently is in widespread use in home bleaching products. In terms of general risk assessment, home bleaching by means of highly concentrated (>10%) carbamide peroxide has been disapproved of recently. Therefore, repeated use of such agents, solely to achieve perfect smiles and youthful looks, might indeed be questioned.

The positive functional, esthetic, and psychosocial impact of modern dentistry has facilitated attractive smiles, and this tremendously affects our patients' confidence and self-esteem. However, as per the particulars given above, selective use of tooth bleaching, based on individual needs and high ethical standards, together with a limitation on its use to patients for whom such treatment could be professionally justified, should be advocated. Supervised tooth bleaching is but an integral part of dentistry. And dentistry is but a part of medicine.

Andrej M. Kielbassa, Prof Dr med dent
 QI Section Editor
 Head, Department of Operative Dentistry and
 Periodontology
 University School of Dental Medicine
 Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Germany