

Smile advocate

Dr Asha Karan of Smile Makers Dental Clinic proves there's more to dentistry than just fixing teeth

By Maripet L. Poso

Articulate, soft spoken and passionate about promoting health education, Dr Asha Karan of Smile Makers Dental Clinic commands attention whenever she speaks, evoking a sense of calm and authority. Her ability to make her patients understand the importance of dental care in a simple language and engaging style is among her traits that sets Dr Asha apart from other dentists.

A graduate from the National University of Singapore, Dr Asha has been practising dentistry for more than 20 years. She also holds a Diploma in General Dental Practice from the Royal College of Surgeons, United Kingdom. She founded Smile Makers Dental Clinic to help change people's attitude towards dental care.

Her passion for health education goes beyond the four corners of her dental clinic. In her spare time, Dr. Asha has volunteered within the community, providing pro bono dental care for residents of charitable homes. For 13 years, she was president of the Singapore Dental Health Foundation, an organisation dedicated to public education and health promotion.

A true smile maker

Ezyhealth & Beauty: What do you find most satisfying about your work?

Dr Asha Karan: The smiles my patients give me. We are Smile Makers after all. I like dressing up my clinic with photos of my patients' smiles.

EHB: Why is a smile important?

Dr Asha: Your smile is a reflection of yourself. It's a reflection of your self-esteem, your values. If you have taken the time to take care of yourself, it means that you are a careful person who values your health, and you want to portray yourself in the best way possible.

EHB: What does it take for you to bring your patients' beautiful smiles back?

Dr Asha: One, we want to help the patient get the smile that they desire. But we must be realistic. Patients' expectations must also be realistic. Two, we empower them with the right techniques, the right information, so that they can maintain the health of their teeth.

When someone comes for veneers, for example, we must first assess whether their mouth is healthy. Veneers are largely a cosmetic procedure. We can't do a cosmetic procedure if we find that the basic health is not there. So we may have to spend some time getting their gums and teeth into good health first. But there are people who say 'I'm very busy, I'm flying here and there. Do it now'.

EHB: How do you deal with such patients?

Dr Asha: We want what's best for them so sometimes we have to say, "No". We explain to them that it is in their best interest to have treatment done in the right sequence. After the mouth is much healthier, do the cosmetics. There are times when patients come in with the wrong perceptions about what they need. For example, if their teeth are irregular, then veneers may not be the answer. They may need to straighten their teeth first. After straightening the teeth, then, if needed, improve the colour and shape with veneers.

Patient care through education

EHB: How important is health education for you?

Dr Asha: For me, health education has

always been important. I see myself as a health professional. The very word, "profession" implies a duty to the community. I feel strongly that I have a duty to patients, not only to give them what is best for them, but to equip myself with knowledge and skills to give them what is right for them. The duty of care for the patient involves keeping myself abreast of the latest techniques and technology in dental care. Health education comes naturally to me. I see it as an essential part of my work as a health professional.

EHB: When it comes to your dental practice, you believe in putting health first before beauty. Can you elaborate on this?

Dr Asha: Dentists are not mere service providers. There has to be congruence between patient's values and the doctor's values. I'd rather restore health before I chase beauty. Patients need to know how to maintain health. For example, straight teeth are more important than white teeth. Straight teeth are easy to clean. With straight teeth you have more efficient bite. If you have straight teeth, your smile looks more refined. Whitened teeth is like the icing on the cake. But first you have to make sure that the cake is good.

EHB: How necessary is oral health education in dental practice?

Dr Asha: If the patient does not understand what I'm doing, they won't appreciate why I do it. They're not going to take care of themselves either. Also, it has something to do with fear. People fear what they don't know. If you make it known to them, if you explain to them in a very simple language, they will say, "Hey, that makes sense!". Knowledge about their health gives them better sense of control. It gives



Dr Asha (third from left) with her staff, Janice Kang, Dr Phoon Wai Leng and Jean Tan

them confidence that they are getting the right treatment.

The importance of consultation

EHB: Do you have a fool-proof approach to treating each patient that comes to you?

Dr Asha: There is no one size fits all. There is no one solution for everything. That's why spending time at a consultation, understanding the patient's condition, understanding their limitation of time, budget and priorities is necessary. It's all about patient-centered healthcare. Understanding the patient's values helps us to customise the treatment. So the initial consultation process is important.

EHB: What do you consider the most valuable service you provide to your patients?

Dr Asha: A person can spend several thousands of dollars straightening teeth or getting crowns and implants made. But if he does not maintain his teeth, all that sophisticated work is not going to last. Straightening teeth, inserting implants, making crowns and dentures, that's just one part of my work -- the more technical part of the work. But helping you, the patient, understand the nature of the problem, and then helping you to control it or to overcome it -- that's my most valuable service. That's patient empowerment. **ehb**