

When dental costs nibble at budgets

Local orthodontist gives take on economy's effect on profession

By Kristin Samuelson, December 2, 2011

Dental expenses are taking quite a bite out of consumers' wallets these days — and, in turn, dentists and orthodontists are seeing revenues diminish.

Sales and profits at American dental offices were down 3 percent during the first nine months of 2011, compared with the same period in 2010, according to a recent survey by Sageworks Inc., a financial analysis firm in North Carolina. And 45 percent of dentists said they were "not at all confident" about what the economy holds for their profession, according to an American Dental Association survey in August.

We asked Dr. Ron Waryjas, who has been practicing orthodontics in South Holland for 26 years and is a member of the ADA and other state- and citywide dental organizations, if he agrees with the survey's findings, and how the economy has been affecting his practice.

Q: Have you noticed a decline in patient visits at your offices?

A: It's affecting us. Visits are down. Practices are consolidating. I know orthodontists have had to let staff go and do more with less. We don't receive any subsidization. Our mission is to deliver a high level of care to individuals. The economy has cut into that to a fairly significant amount.

In our practice, we're down about 20 percent in patient exams. For long-term work, they're in it for the long haul, so they're committed. With general dentists, people are missing cleanings, exams. Sometimes they'll decline radiographs, which can be dangerous, or periodontal work, because it's specialty care and it might not be covered, or they might not be able to afford it.

As an orthodontist, the economy impacts our specialty because we're disposable and dollar-driven. There are very few issues that require my emergency care. We're also seeing an inability to seek treatment by patients who have deformities, or special-needs patients.

Q: How does the economy look from your vantage point?

A: I was a general dentist for eight years, so I've been on the other side of the nuts and bolts of running a practice. We went through this in the early '80s when the steel mills had the same problems. We've ridden this horse before. We're holding our breath. Everyone is being touched right now. I don't think our political leaders realize that.

By getting around and talking to people, you can see the impact. We've had a satellite office in Hoffman Estates for 25 years, where I share the space with a group of general dentists, and we're losing patients in different socioeconomic demographics. We're seeing it across the board.

We've lost an oral surgeon specialist in South Holland already. Specialty doctors are leaving practices because of (older) age, or younger people don't want to take financial risk in an area where people are taking a tighter hold on their wallet.

Q: How much of your time or services do you donate to patients now?

A: We do a lot of pro bono (in the low five figures, maybe \$10,000 per year). Sometimes pro bono just means forgiving a balance. You want to take care of people. Dentists don't go into dentistry to look at teeth; they go in to care for people. That's the mission we have.

We've been financing people and taking care of people over the past few years. I donate a significant amount of time and care that is not tax-deductible and is at no to minor cost for patients. We have to limit how much pro bono we do, because I have to pay staff. Obviously, everyone would want everything at no charge.

We're spending a fair amount of time trying to help our people out, and get them to a point of care that's both cosmetic and functional for them, and at a point where they can afford it. Last week we had a patient who had missed a few visits. He is in bankruptcy and about to lose his house. We're doing a lot of accommodation if we can.

For the full story featuring Sageworks' private industry data, please visit [Chicago Tribune - When dental costs nibble at budgets](#)