

Going, going, gum

The current craze for flogging bits and pieces that are no longer of use to us has spawned a whole raft of TV programmes and car boot sales. Is there any mileage here for dental practices? **Stephen Hancocks** rummages under the stairs.

W e all have a certain fascination for finding that particular something that is worth a fortune but which nobody ever realised. It is the basic driving force behind the *Antiques Roadshow* and the many variants that now grace our screens. While we might be slightly interested in the history of a silver tankard which could have belonged to James I and been dented by a stray lead shot aimed at His Majesty by a would-be assassin while he was visiting Sheffield, what we *really* want to know is how much it is worth – or not. What glee when the self-satisfied, know-it-all collector of Victorian porcelain hedgehogs is told that most of them were made in Taiwan in the 1980s and on a good day may fetch £17.50, looks completely crest fallen and skulks away in disbelief.

But also, how wonderful to discover that the slightly grubby, large Chinese pot that you've been shoving umbrellas in and out of in the hall for the last 20 years is a rare Ming Dynasty vase with an auction value of £35,000. It gives us all hope and inspiration.

So are dental practices immune from such discoveries, such chance findings of treasures in the cabinetry? Probably not and maybe now is the time to start searching to help pay for the Christmas party to end all parties.

Perhaps the best place to start is where the storage takes place; or to be more precise, where the (apparent) junk is stuffed away. Lofts, garages, cupboards under the stairs – all the usual suspects. Dentists love gadgets and the chances are that there will be a stash of these, gathering dust in one or more locations. Usually they will have had, at most, a couple of uses before they've been gradually downgraded from the surgery worktop to the cupboard under the worktop and then out of the surgery altogether. As with most gadgets, they invariably take longer to get out, assemble, disassemble, clean and reassemble than it takes

to do whatever the task is by hand or finish it far faster in the old way, despite it seeming that buying the device was a good idea at the time.

Of course items of this ilk are not likely to be so old that they will be antiques but you'll be surprised at how long some of them have been squirreled away and how the wonderfully retro-fashionable 1960s style boxes (in which they are inevitably still kept) look amazingly chic as modern-classic, fashionable icons. Think for a moment about those smart designer label boutiques that have old wooden tennis racquets, rope snow shoes and dead people's suitcases stacked up at artistic angles next to this autumn's collections of must-have, cotton-pique polos. Surely it can't be long before a Ralph Lauren or a DKNY retail outlet designer drops on the idea of a post-modern dental surgery décor look – bingo, your rub-bish is suddenly in the highest demand.

Then again there is the possibility of something associated with celebrity. Ken Dodd's original orthodontic models perhaps? Jonny Wilkinson's first gum shield? Of course huge care has to be exercised here so as not to contravene patient confidentiality. Plus there is the added recent problem of obstacles like acts of parliament on human tissue disposal. But just as with dealers in rare art, there is always some rich and anonymous collector in Switzerland who will ask no questions as long as they get an original Margaret Thatcher wisdom tooth or an authenticated sample of calculus from a member of Abba.

Famous artists are of course notoriously poor during their lifetimes.

Surely there must be an impressionist painting or two that was executed in barter for a partial denture or an early gold inlay? Be honest, hasn't your curiosity ever been raised by that rather grimy old oil painting slotted behind the spare compressor in the corner of the darkroom? Carefully slide it out and check the signature, turn it over and read anything on the back of the canvas that may give a clue: 'To my wonderful endodontist without whose pain relief my water lilies would never have been finished. C. Monet.' (Though in French, obviously.)

Well go on, what are you waiting for, now you're at the back of the magazine casually put it down, don those heavy duty rubber gloves and head for the cobwebs. If all you find is a bent spatula and two soiled bur stands start asking questions about the team member who left recently and now drives a BMW coupé. Happy hunting!

