

The drills are alive...!

Probably one of the most frequent, negative comments that patients make about going to the dentist is the noise – usually of the ‘the drill’ – so what can we do to help out? **Stephen Hancocks** investigates.

We work surrounded by noise of some sort or another, or perhaps we should say sounds of some variety.

Noise tends to have negative connotations of enforced listening whereas sounds conjure up a choice of a far more pleasant menu of music, trickling waterfalls or Andes’ woodwind incantations. We either use sounds to cover up other less agreeable clatter or for their own, inherent calming effects to provide a soothing ambience for those working and visiting.

Attempting to cover up the noise is certainly not new. In days of yore, before local anaesthetics had even been dreamed of and way before even the days of gramophone records, dentists would ply their trade in market places and other busy thoroughfares. Why? Precisely so that the screams and yells of their patients were drowned out by the background hubbub. The really sophisticated operators allegedly employed someone with a drum, apparently to ‘drum up business’ but in reality to boom out a volley of beats of a length suitable, and at the appropriate moment, to camouflage the less than enticing yells of the hapless customer.

Thankfully, such extremes are no longer required and the modern use of music is far more likely to be used to instil pleasant feelings of relaxation and serenity. Indeed, such sensory trickery might well be compared to the way that people selling houses are advised to brew coffee and if at all possible have some fresh bread baking in the oven when prospective buyers arrive. The wafting

aromas being designed to provide the illusion of gracious living and luxurious lifestyles.

It is easy to blithely say ‘oh, let’s have some music in the practice’ but not quite so straightforward to choose what to have on and when. Pity the poor shop assistants for example who have to suffer the acoustic torture of three or more months of *Jingle Bells* and *Ding Dong Merrily* before the decorations come down and they emerge psychologically damaged into the January sales. Quite apart from what the dental team might like to listen to – Kaiser Chiefs or Beethoven? – there is the image problem of what the selection says about the practice. Wagner’s Ring Cycle might last the distance but is it entirely appropriate to accompany a surgical implant session? Bob the Builder’s theme tune might be ideal during fissure sealing but not so conducive to placing veneers or cementing crowns. And as for *You’ve had a bad day*, this is probably best left out of the repertoire completely.

However, it could be the making of a practice intending to attract baby boomer patients to have quadrasonic Status Quo and wall of sound Pink Floyd thrumming through the waiting room. Just make sure the receptionist is an ageing hippy. Alternatively,

a well modulated burst of Glenn Miller might have the occupants of the waiting room

up and jiving like a rehearsal for *Strictly Come Dancing*. It takes all sorts.

Not that the only decibel distractions are strictly musically based. Take door bells and especially door chimes as prime examples. While

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the apparently delightful chinketty-chink of a bell on a brass bracket attached to the door of the practice sounds reassuringly welcoming to the patient, to the front desk staff it can be like water torture every time someone passes in or out.

It is always worth remembering that patients may be disturbed by noises that we take for granted, indeed which because they are so familiar we no longer consciously hear. Rather like visitors to houses situated near railway lines that rattle each time a train passes and who look alarmed as the cutlery vibrates across the table while the owners take no notice at all and carry on describing their holiday in Corfu or the neighbour’s latest gardening exploits without a moment’s pause. Compressors switching on and off can sound like some scary machine powering its way out of the cupboard under the stairs or through the surgery wall; the autoclave letting off steam like a phantom engine from a bygone age.

When the air rotor was invented, the idea that anyone could carry around their own tunes contained in a small device no bigger than a cigarette packet would have been like science fiction. Who knows, in future we might be able to have a tiny chip implanted so that just by thinking of a melody we get it played by the latest boy band, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the local brass band ... er hum! Take that wretched thing out of your ears and get the next patient in here. Now!

