A close-up, high-resolution image of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in detail. The flag is draped, creating soft folds and shadows. The stars are white on a dark blue field, and the stripes are red and white.

:interview

AMERICAN BEAUTY

Julie Ferry gains an insight into life at a fast-paced American private practice, where appearance plays an important role in customer satisfaction.

From the television and films we watch, to the food we eat, it is clear that we Brits have adopted many aspects of our American counterparts' culture. But how about dentistry? Have we embraced the way that practices work in the USA and taken a look at the services they provide? As you would expect, there are many similarities between practices in both countries, with a strong focus on patient's needs and comfort. However, there are also some interesting differences.

American patients are very interested in their oral health and the appearance of their

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teeth, and this is apparent at Dr Nicholas Elian's private practice in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The practice, which specialises in implants and periodontology, attracts patients with a positive attitude to oral health.

Melanda Criner, who works as a dental assistant at the practice, recognises the patients' desire to ensure their teeth are aesthetically pleasing.

'The cosmetic side of dentistry is very important to American patients and therefore so is their oral health. Our patients are very relaxed and come between every four to

six months, depending on what their needs are. We do a lot of cosmetic work here like bleaching. No one wants yellow teeth and our patients want their teeth as white as they can get them. I think it is because of the celebrities they see on television and in magazines which makes them want the same result.'

Hygienist and practice manager Hertha Kausner finds her patients' attitude towards dentistry encouraging. 'Patients in America have a positive attitude to dental care which I find very inspiring. It is only some older patients that are a little reluctant to visit because of experiences they had when they were growing up. Now, the new generation has been introduced to dentistry at a young age so that when they become older it's a routine, rather than just going to the dentist when they feel pain.'

Hertha says she doesn't mind doing what would usually be the job of two people, as she is planning for her future.

'Currently I am the full time dental hygienist and I am also the office manager. This means that I take care of staff schedules, pay roll, insurance, billing, basically everything in the office that needs to be taken care of I do. It is a lot but I work six days a week with Friday allocated just for paperwork. On the other days I usually do my paperwork at the end of the day, after I have finished with my patients. I do it because eventually I am aiming to just do practice management. I am almost 40 years old and I can't see myself doing hygiene when I am 50. So I am trying to develop my skills as I go along. I am working hard at it as it is something that I really want to do.'

Hertha has been at the practice, which is just five minutes from New York, for five years and decided to stay there when Dr Elian bought the practice from her previous employer.

'When Dr Elian bought the practice, a lot of the patients only stayed at the practice because I stayed. I am very proud of that as I worked very hard for it. I find my work very rewarding and feel that I am making a difference to my patient's lives. They take me

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very seriously when I tell them about their oral hygiene and I see a lot of improvement with them. I always try to make them proud of their achievements as well by taking a before and after picture, so that they can see the difference.'

Hertha says she also has the luxury of time at the private practice.

'I get to spend an hour with each of my patients. In that hour I take x-rays, I go over home care with the patient, I do my cleaning and then the dentist will come in and do a thorough examination. We give our patients our time and catering to our patients' needs is what the practice is based on.'

Melanda agrees that having the time to get to know each individual patient is central to each member of the team.

'We treat our patients like our friends and make sure that we get to know every one of them. We all work together and patients really like that.'

Unlike some NHS practices in the UK, that have to turn away patients because their lists are full, American practices often have to rely on recommendations to bring in other patients to the practice. Dr Elian's practice relies on their patients recommending the practice to their friends and family says Yuriko Romero, who has been working as a receptionist there for two years.

'We are fortunate that all of our patients are very happy to come here and we don't

really have a problem bringing in patients. I think our patients recommend us to other people because they are very pleased with our work and our organisational skills. This is because we all work together as a team. We have a wide range of patients that come to see us and we try to cater for them all. We have an older crowd and a younger crowd and also children that come in. Therefore, our waiting room is very modern so that everyone is occupied whilst they wait.'

As one of only three dental assistants that work at the practice, Melanda's working day is a long one.

'My working hours are usually from 8am until 5pm. But, we work until 9pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and we also work on a Saturday, so it is a long week. I like it though as I am always really busy, so my days don't drag at all.'

And Melanda insists that having more dentists than assistants doesn't prove too much to cope with.

'As there are only three of us, we rotate between all of the dentists, helping them with whatever they need depending on who is around. There are usually about five dentists working here at any one time and although it is busy, I like working with different people. I take x-rays, pour models for the laboratory, send labs out, update charts and talk to patients. I also assist Hertha when she is doing bleaching on patients. I don't find it difficult or stressful.'

Both Yuriko and Melanda say that a large part of their job satisfaction is their relationships with other staff members. Yuriko says,

'The atmosphere at the practice is very friendly. Everybody basically chips in and helps everybody else with whatever they need. We communicate very well with each other, which makes it a great place to work.'

It is this positive atmosphere combined with a patient-base eager to attend that makes the practice an enjoyable place to work.

British patients may not yet put the same importance on the cosmetic appearance of their teeth, but is it just a matter of time before they demand the same as their American equivalents? Only time will tell.