A bit niffy

Smells can be very evocative, but not always in a good way.

Stephen Hancocks has a sniff around the practice.

Music and smells are supposed to be the two things which most instantly conjure up memories or images in our minds. The merest hint of a familiar - even if long forgotten - tune immediately take us back to a favourite holiday, a romantic evening or a person who we hadn't thought about for ages. Years don't just melt away, they literally vanish as those first few notes or that cheesy lyric completely arrests our senses.

The same is true of smells and although I've never quite understood why, the ability of a pungent aroma has that same magic effect of transporting me back to a place or time that I would otherwise have no reason to think of at that particular moment. Of course this can work both ways: good smells leading to happy remembrances and bad smells lingering in the twilight corners of the memory. For me the lilting perfume of frangipani has me instantaneously on the poolside of an idyllic hotel in Bali; the acrid whiff of a caretaker's bucket and mop and I am removed to the hall in my primary school where a fellow pupil has just shared his breakfast with us again all over the wooden floorboards.

For many people dental practices have similar evocative scents, and not always of the Bali swimming pool variety. The trouble is that we cease to notice them. Working in the same place every day the accustomed smell of the premises no longer reaches our conscious nostrils and so when patients say that it has a distinctive smell we start sniffing to see if we can detect what it is, which is impossible because it is so familiar.

Oil of cloves, or eugenol, is often cited as the characteristic smell of 'the dentist' although patients, often the anxious or phobic sort who have experienced a general anaesthetic for dental treatment in their younger lives, will evoke the whiff of 'the gas' as being the overriding memory. In fact the 'gas' is odourless and it is most likely the odour of the

rubber mask or the disinfectant used on it that they are remembering - but it doesn't much help to relax them if you try and tell them they're wrong!

Some practices do their best to disguise any such nasty niffs by having coffee brewing and, rather like having freshly baked bread on the go when you are trying to sell a house or flat, the effect is noticeable even if only initially. The 'why have I come to Starbucks to have my teeth filled?' question only lasts a moment or two but it does the job nevertheless. Other practices go much further with specially selected room sprays to waft patients off to summer meadows, country gardens or exotic seascaped island locations.

Not that all the smells we come across in practice are necessarily strictly dentally or clinically related. Our colleagues' sometimes weird and wonderful lunch ingredients can overpower the staff room and beyond for a good few hours into the afternoon, certain fish pâtés, spreads and sandwiches being obvious culprits. Even the otherwise humble banana skin

left idle in an open bin for too long can have the whole team sniffing the air and turning up their noses until the offending future compost is dumped elsewhere. And as for the staff room fridge after a Bank Holiday weekend ... whose stilton is this?

Not all olfactory stimuli are necessarily generated by the practice. Patients have a large part to play in the milieu that forms the daily background bouquet that we move through. Bad breath is an obvious first candidate which in the worst cases arrives some few minutes before the owner even enters the room. But body odour is not uncommon either, is it? and the tell-tale look from nurse to dentist as the patient settles themselves in the chair for an hour long appointment leads to a rapid session of masking-up and shallow breathing. Similar quizzical glances followed by a greater certainty follow the suspicion that wind has been broken. No one says anything but then no one needs to. Sometimes a smirk, occasionally a badly suppressed guilty look, rarely an admission of guilt but always a huge guffaw afterwards. We are only human after all. And although perfumes, colognes and aftershaves

are meant to smell attractive sometimes the fragrance that the wearer perceives can be quite different from the strange aroma that follows them like a personal aura keeping misquotes at bay and knocking over old ladies.

In some ways at times it feels as if it would almost be preferable to have no sense of smell at all but then again you'd miss the transporting pleasures of fresh bread, frangipani and sea breeze even if you still had Beethoven's Fifth and Abba to waft you away.