

Women in uniform

A Melbourne practice has embraced the idea that young patients and female patients will often prefer to see a female dentist. Hence the creation of Women in Dentistry. **By Kerry Ramsey**

The 1939 drama flick, *The Women*, starring Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell and Norma Shearer, was unique in that it used an all-female cast. In Melbourne's CBD, a dental practice has taken a similar approach—with an all-female staff. But the similarities end here—while the film was full of catty, manipulative characters, Women in Dentistry is the epitome of compassion and professionalism.

While female patients, often with children, are filling the surgery's waiting room, it's male patients who have also joined the 'club'. "Men will say to us, 'This is Women in Dentistry—can we come here?'," says founder and dentist Dr Mary E. Miller. As she points out, the practice has a higher-than-normal percentage of male patients. "You would think our practice would have a high female content of patients but we actually have a 50/50 split."

With a staff of 10—three dentists, a hygienist, patient care coordinator, practice manager and four dental assistants—the all-female component was a no-brainer for Dr Miller when she opened the practice in 1998.

She says a small number of patients come to them for religious reasons, but since many female patients prefer female doctors, they follow the same philosophy when it's time for a dental check-up. "Women seem to chose other women because they feel more comfortable," says Dr Janet Daniels, who joined the practice a year ago.

She also notes that children often "feel more comfortable" with female dentists. "There are not many men teaching at schools anymore so the children are exposed to a lot more women." And Dr Miller adds, "Some prefer to see women after having an unpleasant experiences with a male dentist."

A practitioner with 36 years' dental experience, Dr Miller's

visionary approach and high achievements first became apparent at the University of Melbourne when she obtained honours in every subject. "We had just nine women out of 50 students in the final year [1975]," she recalls. As she graduated, she also received the Top Student of the Year Award, the William Leslie Elvins Prize for Oral Surgery and the Francis Grey Prize for Conservative Dentistry.

After working in private practice in Geelong and an orthodontic practice in Essendon, she joined a general practice on Collins Street, Melbourne, in 1977. "There was a feminist movement [in the '70s] but there were very few female den-

Quote

Dr Mary Miller, Women In Dentistry, Melbourne

"There is a big group who only want to see female practitioners—the practice has many male patients."

tists in the city at that time," recalls Dr Miller.

She purchased the practice in 1981, and ran it for 17 years under the eponymous title, Dr Mary Miller, until she moved the surgery to a larger space in the same building on the sixth floor. Attuned to the latest marketing trends in the '90s, she recognised the importance of a catchy moniker for the practice, and it was in 1998 that she opened the door to a new business, boasting a new fit-out, new uniforms, and a rebranded name—Women in Dentistry.

Now a three-chair surgery, it comprises Dr Jo-Anne Cherry, who's worked with Dr Miller for the past 22 years, and hygienist Mandy Boyd, who's been on board for 19 years. Dr



Janet Daniels joined the practice in May last year, and the practice is topped off with practice manager Teresa Crawford and patient care coordinator Joanna Muir.

While an all-female dentistry firm is a rarity in Australia, more female dentists have entered the market in private practices over the past decade. A study released last June, Trends in the Australian Dental Labour Force, 2000 to 2009, from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, revealed that in 2009, 29.8 per cent of dentists working solely in the private sector were female—up from 19.9 per cent in 2000.

According to Dr Miller, patients are attracted to the female sensibility. “We try to create a dental home so people feel comfortable,” she explains. “Patients often say it’s like coming home to their lounge room. We try to create that feeling of care with the way we operate and the way our staff are trained in their communication and consideration of people. Most of it is in-house training, as well as some courses.”

The caring-sharing philosophy has also had a long-term effect. As Dr Miller points out, many of her patients were three when they arrived for their first check-ups. Now they’re in their forties, and bringing their own toddlers in for check-ups.

To give the waiting room and surgeries a soothing ambience, an interior designer specialising in dental fit-outs was enlisted before the practice opened. A colour palette of cappuccino and beige, particularly in the furniture and artworks, was selected, and is offset by the corporate logo in sky-blue.

“It’s not like a big glossy over-the-top place,” explains Dr Miller. “It’s modern but quite compact.”

When it comes to the staff, flexibility is paramount in this practice as it gives the three dentists a good work-life balance. Dr Miller works four days a week, while Dr Cherry and Dr Daniels work between three and four days a week. For Dr Daniels, she has time to look after her two young sons, while Dr Cherry spends time after work as a member of the Victorian branch of the Australian Dental Association.

For Dr Miller, the extra hands on board allows her more time on the managerial side of the practice. “I’ve done management and business training and when I moved into this practice, I took on a business coach specialising in running a small business and learning how to deal with the staff. I’m managing all the time when I’m working, as well as spending time with patients. I also do two-hours work at night or on weekends.”

Both Dr Miller and Dr Daniels concur that male dentists can be just as capable at creating a friendly, caring environment in a practice. But is there anything that men can’t do? Dr Daniels admits there is a physical attribute that most men don’t have—slender fingers for intricate dental work.

“I often think I’m glad that I’m a woman because if I was a big man, it would be very difficult to do certain things,” she says. “In the instances when I take teeth out, patients often say, ‘Are you sure you’ve had your Weet-Bix?’ I have to tell them it’s not really strength in dentistry—it’s our technique.”

And there’s no doubt that Women in Dentistry has it all—a gentle manner, business prowess and dental finesse. □