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HEALTH

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**Aromatherapy?
Fresh Juice?
Foot Massage?
Classical Music?**

**Or Will You Just
Be Having A
Root Canal?**

A REPORT FROM THE NEW FRONTIER OF DENTISTRY

SECOND OPINION: CLOSING THE GENDER GAP ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

THE LOWDOWN ON PAIN • DO HEMOPHILES REALLY HATE?

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**IN AN ERA OF FEW
CAVITIES AND
DECLINING FEES,
A NEW TYPE OF
DENTIST IS
TRANSFORMING
THE BUSINESS OF
"DRILL, FILL AND
BILL" INTO A HIGH-
STYLE, HIGH-TECH
INDUSTRY DESIGNED
TO SELL YOU A
WHOLE NEW SMILE.
NO INSURANCE
ACCEPTED, PLEASE.**

WELCOME TO THE GILDED AGE OF DENTISTRY

By Therese Droste
Photos by Bill Crandall

At the Washington Center for Dentistry, the scent of apple cinnamon aromatherapy fills the air. A concierge warmly greets you and offers lemonade or bottled water from a juice bar. Well-groomed receptionists peer at you, their matching crisp white jackets with sophisticated logos reminiscent of Neiman Marcus. Have a seat and place your feet on an electronic foot massager while you wait for an appointment.

Around Washington and nationwide, a confluence of demographic, financial, professional and technological factors has given rise to a new style of dental practice—dental boutiques that embrace and flatter clients with soothing environments and high-end personal service, and specialize in such costly cosmetic services as porcelain enamel replacement for damaged teeth, bleaching, crown lengthening and implants.

And there is a lot of money out there. National expenditures for dental services are projected to exceed \$60 billion in 2000, up from \$53.8 billion in 1998, or

about 5 percent of the nation's total spending on health care, according to the first Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health, which was released in May.

Dentists jockeying to dip into the cream of that business are redefining their jobs away from the "drill, fill and bill" professionals of the past to upmarket dental therapists for a pragmatic reason: It's hard to make a living just filling cavities and doing root canals. Strides in dental protection, specifically the use of fluoridated water, have resulted in nearly 55 percent of children between ages 5 and 17 showing no tooth decay in their permanent teeth, according to federal data gathered between 1988 and 1991. Only about 28 percent were cavity-free in the early 1970s.

With dentists no longer inundated with so many cavities to fill, the American Dental Association reports, eight out of 10 dentists now spend at least some of their professional time performing cosmetic services. Some dentists have opted to do only cosmetic work; others continue their conventional practices while



building up their more lucrative cosmetic businesses. Many are savvy businessmen devoting serious time and money to study customer service techniques and marketing to help promote new dental treatment options—options that are almost always paid for out-of-pocket by the patient.

"Cosmetic dentistry services are elective, and generally do not involve solving a health-threatening situation. Ethical dentists must be cautious to make sure they are not selling See DENTISTS, Page 12