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## THAI DENTAL SPA MAKES VISIT A PLEASURE Have a message... while i work on your molars

AT this dental clinic, when you say 'Aaahh,' it's likely to be a sigh of pleasure.

Pleasure, at a dentist?

Welcome to the dental spa, where you can relax and have a massage before, after or while your teeth are drilled.

The concept - popular in the US and now available in Bangkok - might come to Singapore, if Dr Watchareewon Porncharoen has her way.

The dentist-entrepreneur, who's better known as Dr Lily, is keen to export the concept to other Asian cities.

'I hope to collaborate with a Singaporean partner because I think this is the new trend in dental practice and there will be a demand.

'The idea is to focus on dental wellness, and not just the functional or aesthetic aspects,' she said.

Her only obstacle to setting up a branch in Singapore is that the authorities fear that having spa services in dental clinics here might lead to misconceptions about standards and professionalism in the practice. (See report on facing page.)

Dr Lily's recently opened Bangkok Dental Spa Clinic has been a hit with patients, and has the potential for expansion.

The New Paper on Sunday visited her 25 million baht (\$1m) clinic at the upmarket Sukhumvit area (Bangkok's Orchard Road) and it hardly seemed like a dentist's clinic.

### GURGLING FOUNTAINS

As in a conventional spa, patients' five senses - smell, touch, sight, hearing, and taste - are pleasantly pampered.

The experience begins even before you step into the clinic.

The doorway is a Balinese-style entrance, with water features and potted palms. Clay tiles in calming shades of brown adorn the walls.

The attentive receptionist greets patients with a polite 'Sawatdeekha', the Thai equivalent of 'Hello, welcome'.

The antiseptic smell, bright lights, whining drills and intimidating facade of conventional dental clinics are all missing.

Instead, soothing aromatherapy fragrances, dim lighting, comfortable sofas, artfully-placed sculptures and framed pictures all create an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity.

The calming gurgles of the fountains also make it less and less like a dental clinic.

And the icing on the cake?

Massages.

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Customers at Dr Lily's clinic get free massages thrown in with their treatments.

Depending on the type and complexity of the treatment, patients are given either a foot and neck rub, or a full body oil massage.

In most cases, the massages are offered before and after the dental work.

#### **HOUR-LONG MESSAGES**

But those patients who are extra-anxious and afraid of the dentist can relax beforehand with a full-body oil massage, which usually lasts for an hour.

'Massage, or any kind of touch, relaxes the patient by releasing hormones called endorphins,' said Dr Lily, who has been practising for close to 20 years.

'These help patients to feel calm, reducing their discomfort in the dental chair.'

She first hit upon the idea of opening such a spa-like clinic when she had to calm a nervous patient last year.

'I had a Hawaiian patient at another clinic, who became quite bothered and was complaining of a strained jaw.

'He was undergoing a complicated procedure that had already lasted more than an hour by then.

'So, I asked my assistant to massage him, but she refused, saying it wasn't her job. I didn't know what to do, but in the end, I massaged his feet myself.

'He became visibly relaxed and so could carry on with the dental treatment.'

Now, Dr Lily employs one masseuse who was trained at Bangkok's Ministry of Public Health.



Ms Panunda Singnard, 30, who has 14 years of experience at previous spa and massage centres, said: 'At school, we learnt which pressure points relieved pain.

'Using this knowledge, my experience, and the patient's cues, I try to calm them down and make their visit enjoyable.'

#### **COME BACK FOR MORE**

All these efforts aren't wasted, as the clinic's patients do acknowledge and recognise the benefits. Many return for more.

Mr Hans Alverland, a 56-year-old security consultant from Sweden, who is a regular patient at the clinic, said of the massages: 'Very good. Certainly helped me calm down.'

Singapore-based Mr Michael Harrison, a regional director with Microsoft, agreed: 'I enjoyed it. The spa-concept was a bonus. I've recommended the clinic to my friends and family.'

More than 90 per cent of the clinic's clientele are expats or tourists.

'This is possibly because charges at the clinic are higher than conventional clinics in Bangkok,' said Dr Lily, who declined to reveal her clinic's income. 'But they're still considerably lower than that of patients' home countries.

'This works together with our Thai hospitality and medical expertise.'

She has plans to expand her dental wellness philosophy by opening branches in Phuket, Chiang Mai and Koh Samui, and with overseas collaborators.

### Nicer waiting rooms here but no dental spa yet

If you're looking to experience a dental spa with all the works here, you'll have to wait.

Singapore does not have such a concept, perhaps because people may get the wrong idea about dental practices that throw in a free massage with the drilling.

Dr Joseph Seow, a dentist with Synergy Dental Group, said: 'It's difficult to open a dental spa in Singapore as guidelines do not encourage it.

'There can be a misconception that dental spas or dental clinics with spa services like massages are not as medically professional as conventional ones.

'Or maybe, some people might get confused and go to the clinic for massages only.'

The Honorary General-Secretary of the Singapore Dental Association, Dr Anthony Goh, was more enthusiastic about the idea.

'Having a massage or a spa-like ambience is one of the ways to calm patients and to make them comfortable.

'Dentistry is one of those things that are most associated with fear and anxiety. If providing a spa of sorts can help the patient, and enhance his visit to the dentist, it should be considered.'

Singapore clinics have only gone as far as to make their waiting rooms more patient-friendly - with aromatherapy, controlled lighting, comfy sofas, and pleasant staff.

Some even screen videos as the dental procedure is being done.

But none offer massages, although MOH is looking at the current legislation to see if it can ease things to allow dental spas to open without damaging public trust in dentists in general.

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