

Latest wrinkle: Medical spas

JOHN GEORGE
 STAFF WRITER

The circular fountain in the lobby is the first hint that Dr. Nalin Patel's new office opening next week in Langhorne is not your typical dental practice.

Other clues include the concierge, the photo studio for before-and-after pictures and the coffee bar.

"We have curved walls instead of straight walls," Patel said. "Nothing is sharp. We don't want our patients reminded of anything sharp. Even the plants are not prickly." Creating the proper atmosphere is a key feature to the practice, Oxford Valley Dental Excellence, which also will be home to the Smile Spa that will have licensed aestheticians.

Spa services will include skin rejuvenation and tightening, massage therapy, non-invasive cellulite reduction and laser hair removal.

Patel, a dentist for more than three decades, said creating a medical spa within his practice was a natural move given that 70 percent of the work he does is cosmetic dentistry in areas ranging from teeth whitening to porcelain veneers and laminates. "When I've done a smile makeover, the first thing patients do is look in the mirror and see their face," he said. "They notice wrinkles and say, 'Now I'm going to have to go to a plastic surgeon.'"

Patel figured he could add spa treatment services that involve no insurance reimbursement hassles since patients pay for the services out of pocket.

He is not alone in that line of thinking. More than two dozen medical spas have opened in the area during the past few years at a time when escalating malpractice insurance costs and declining reimbursement rates have many doctors scaling back their practices, moving to other states or retiring earlier.

Some spas are freestanding, while others are part of physician offices.

The number of medical spas has climbed from 162 locations in 2000 to 472 locations



CURT HUDSON

Dr. Arpan N. Patel at his Oxford Valley Dental Excellence and Smile Spa.



KURT HUDSON

Wendy King, a licensed medical aesthetician, performs laser skin tightening on Diane Gruhler, a massage therapist at Oxford Valley Dental. Dr. Arpan N. Patel observes.

in 2004, according to latest figures from the International Spa Association. In 2000, medical spas handled 1.1 million visits and generated \$68 million in revenue. By 2004, those numbers grew to 1.8 million visits and \$236 million in revenue.

Medical spas are the fastest-growing segment of the spa industry, according to association spokeswoman Jennifer Bustle.

The exact number of medical spas in the region is unknown. Richard McGarvey, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Health Department, said the state agency does not license such facilities. ...

Patel has been performing cosmetic dentistry since the mid-1970s. He said the technology and materials have improved dramatically.

Despite that, fear continues to be one of the main reasons people avoid going to the dentist, he said.

The spa environment was designed to create a "soothing atmosphere" and help alleviate anxiety.

Patel, who also has a practice in Fairless Hills, said his son Dr. Apran N. Patel will be the primary dentist at the new site, which cost \$2.5 million to build and equip, located next to the Oxford Valley Mall.

By the end of the year the practice expects to have three other dentists along with three dental hygienists and more than two dozen support staff. The Smile Spa will open with two aestheticians and is expected to grow to four or five during the next three months.