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Highlights: Dentists

Many people avoid a trip to the dentist like the plague. But finding a dentist who leaves patients smiling—and their smiles healthy—can help eliminate much of the anxiety around professional dental care. The new issue of **Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK** magazine and www.checkbook.org identify local dentists top-rated for care, service, and results, and identify top-quality dentists whose fees are far below average.

CHECKBOOK surveyed 13,000 Puget Sound consumers about their experiences with local dentists and reported the findings. Surveyed consumers were asked to indicate how each dentist measured up to his or her peers in categories such as:

- Producing the results you expect
- Asking about symptoms or problems
- Explaining and checking prevention methods (flossing, brushing, etc.)
- Being gentle
- Discussing diagnosis, treatment options, and costs
- Maintaining a pleasant, clean office and pleasant staff
- Keeping down time in waiting room and delays in chair
- Arranging an appointment quickly when needed
- Overall care and service

Among the 284 top-rated dentists listed in CHECKBOOK's report, 145 were rated "superior" for "overall care and service" by more than 95 percent of their surveyed patients. In contrast, among the local dentists who did not make CHECKBOOK's "top-rated" list, many got such favorable ratings from fewer than 70 percent of their surveyed patients.

CHECKBOOK's price shopping also found big differences from dentist to dentist, with some dentists charging more than twice as much as others for the same procedures. For example:

- For a routine examination and cleaning for an established patient, prices among surveyed dentists ranged from \$16 to \$272
- For one porcelain crown for an adult molar, including post and core, prices ranged from \$890 to \$1,832.
- For a simple, single root canal on an adult premolar, excluding restorative work, prices among surveyed dentists ranged from \$310 to \$1,300

Fortunately, there are many highly rated dentists who charge below-average fees, and many dental offices are willing to share pricing information over the phone, so patients can compare prices by calling and

asking for costs on sample services. Also, some of the dentists in CHECKBOOK's survey provided price lists for common services, and that information is available at www.checkbook.org.

One of the best ways to save money on dental care, however, is by practicing good preventive care. Regular brushing, flossing, and professional cleanings will help patients avoid future expenses for treatment and restoration.

Another way to save is to avoid being over-sold. One of the most common complaints from the customers CHECKBOOK surveyed is the hard-sell of many dentists, with comments like:

"They're all about making money. Walking into his office is like stepping into an infomercial. They have tons of products to sell. They also are quite focused on high dollar preventative care and unnecessary procedures (replacing fillings that are not in need of replacement, etc.)."

CHECKBOOK advises getting an independent second opinion before having an expensive procedure done if it is not clearly needed.

Patients who don't have employer-sponsored dental insurance and don't mind restrictions on which dentists they see could save hundreds or thousands of dollars per year by signing up for prepaid dental plans, especially if they have a large family or need frequent dental care. For example, CHECKBOOK estimated that, with one prepaid plan, for a family with husband, wife, and two children needing routine care plus two topical fluoride treatments, a total of three fillings, and a root canal and porcelain crown, enrollment in the prepaid plan would cut total dental costs for the year by more than \$2,500, even after allowing for the prepaid plan's premium. But be wary about quality: few of the dentists we have identified as top-rated participate in these prepaid dental plans.

Regardless of which dentist he or she chooses, the patient should continue to evaluate whether that dentist is providing the care he or she deserves. A good dentist will:

- Take an accurate patient history at the first exam and update records at subsequent exams
- Give thorough, up-to-date information on caring for teeth
- Ask questions and carefully inspect the patient's mouth during exams
- Explain treatment options and provide a written plan prior to big procedures
- Show concern for patient safety—provide a lead apron for x-rays, wear mask and gloves
- Avoid causing discomfort—work efficiently and gently, observe the patient closely, provide painkillers when appropriate
- Provide competent treatment resulting in a comfortable bite and nicely finished tooth surfaces

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated dentists, as shown in the new issue of Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please call Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 to schedule.

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