

# Does Whitening Help Your Practice... or Hurt It?

by Rod Kurthy, DMD

**W**hitening is a very misunderstood concept among dentists. First, the low cost or free offer of whitening to attract new patients is often gone about in the wrong way, and second, the promise of whitening as a gateway to more cosmetic treatment is often falsely assumed.

## **Whitening to Attract New Patients**

You spend a lot of money for each patient you get into your practice. These new patients are of no benefit if they never return and pay for necessary or optional treatment. So why is it that so many dentists virtually push these new patients out of their offices after working so hard and spending so much to get them in the first place?

Let's say you offer free whitening to attract new patients. You look for the fastest, least expensive method of whitening to offer – because of course, since you're giving it away for free, you can't afford to spend much time or money on the whitening.

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You spent all this money to market to hundreds, if not thousands of potential patients, but just a tiny percentage of them respond to your marketing. That makes each one of these patients very, very valuable. So why are you buying the cheap stuff? These are the very few who said, "OK, I'll give you a chance. Show me what you can do!" Better not drop the ball, or they'll drop you.

If the patient does not follow your recommendations, book treatment, pay for treatment and refer others, then your marketing money is a total waste. When that new patient walks in your door, they have *not* committed to be your patient. They're simply giving you a try. You still have to instill confidence in them or they're gone.

You've spent a ton of money to get that patient there, but then you're afraid to spend a little more money and time to keep them? What's wrong with this picture?

The patient comes to you because of an offer of free whitening. Even though you give it away at a low cost or for free, they still expect it to work. When you use a quickie protocol and the cheapest products you can find, your results probably aren't very impressive. That means you've just disappointed this new patient you've worked so hard and paid so much money to get into your practice; you've proven to them that you don't deserve their confidence. Do you really think they'll have you do their veneers if you can't even get their teeth white? Do you think they'll trust you to do *any* treatment on them or their families?

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They might not say a word, but they just never come back, and you scratch your head wondering why these patients never follow through. It must be because paid advertising doesn't bring in "referral quality patients," right? Wrong!

If you're offering inexpensive or free whitening, get them white. Impress them! It will pay off in spades. Once you impress them, they're much more inclined to follow your treatment recommendations and certainly more inclined to refer others to you.

Whitening gels are unstable chemicals. That is precisely why they can break down quickly when placed in the mouth.

The downside is that because of this instability, they start breaking down immediately upon manufacture unless stabilizers are used in the formula or continuous refrigeration is provided.

Stabilizers – like anhydrous base and acidifiers – add stability to whitening gels. But when you want them to break down in the mouth, they're not going to break down as well and will be less effective. Also these stabilizers result in a much higher osmolarity and often acidic pH, both of which cause more whitening sensitivity.

Even when these stabilizers are used, the gels still break down at room temperature and especially during storage in hot warehouses and in freight trucks that average 125-165 degrees Fahrenheit. The cheaper the whitening gel, the less that whitening company can spend on their overhead, and the larger their batches are when they manufacture. By the time you receive them, they have often been unrefrigerated and overheated for significant periods of time. Combine that with the stabilizers, and you have a much less effective whitening gel.

What if you take a bit more time and spend just a few more dollars to provide the most effective whitening system available? If you did it for cheap or even free, you're a hero; the *"best dentist I've ever gone to."* They take your recommendations

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for other cosmetic or restorative dentistry. They tell their friends that you gave them this great white smile and it didn't even cost much or was free. Think those friends will be asking for your name? Of course they will.

This is the big payoff. Don't step over the dollars to pick up the pennies. Impress those new patients and make them yours!



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b



Fig. 2a



Fig. 2b

**Figs. 1 & 2:** Effective KöR Whitening results.

### The False Promise

You've heard it all before, "Buy our whitening products and whiten your patients' teeth. Once their teeth are white, they'll be asking you for more cosmetic treatment." Most dentists have not found this to be true. It is a false promise that whitening is a gateway to more cosmetic treatment.

The bottom line is that most whitening results are not that spectacular. Maybe your patient is happy her teeth are a little whiter, but others don't even notice, and



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

**Figs. 3 & 4:** Effective KöR Whitening results.

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Fig. 5a



Fig. 5b



Fig. 5c

**Figs. 5:** 78-year-old patient with 19 shade improvement (from C4 to bleaching shade 020) with KöR Whitening. Patient had crowns 3, 4, 6, 12, 13, 14, 19 and bridge 28x30 replaced to match color.

they're not white enough for her to obsess over, so she really doesn't give it much thought. End of story.

What if you could actually give your patient a whitening result that knocks her socks off (Figs. 3 & 4)? Every time she sees herself in the mirror she'll be shocked. She'll spend time studying her smile. Her new white smile looks great... until she sees that darker PFM crown on a lower left bicuspid or molar. "I'm going to ask Dr. Johnson if we can replace those crowns with whiter ones" or, "Wow, my teeth look great, but I never realized how crooked and chipped my teeth are, or how ugly the gaps between my teeth are. Maybe Dr. Johnson can fix that for me" [with veneers].

This happens all the time, but only when the patient is truly impressed by the whiteness, amazed by all the comments from friends and spends time looking at her smile. Then she'll see all those imperfections and obsess over them until you fix them.

Here's an amazing example: This patient was 78 years old (Fig. 5). She started out with a solid C4 color. After whitening, her teeth were 19 shades lighter – a bleaching shade 020 (three shades lighter than a B1). At a family reunion her family went wild. Three relatives drove more than an hour and a half to have their teeth whitened. And over the following nine months this patient paid to have me replace crowns 3, 4, 6, 12, 13, 14, 19 and bridge 28X30 because she wanted to match the rest of her teeth.

Many 78-year-olds wouldn't replace them even if they had recurrent caries – they'd simply say, "I'm old. Just leave them alone." So if true whitening can get a 78-year-old to react this way, just imagine how your middle-age and younger patients will react.

But what if all this costs too much? Make sure you offer your patients a great financing option. I've used CareCredit successfully in my practice for about 25 years (even before they were called CareCredit). All this treatment is high profit, so you can easily pay just a little of that to CareCredit or another financing company for extended payments at no interest and still make a great profit. Remember, it's not what it costs, but how affordable you make it for patients (easy monthly payments with no-interest financing).

What about referrals? If you used a super-effective whitening system, her friends will notice her beautiful white teeth immediately and then they'll ask about you. However, this referral system only works if you were able to get that patient's teeth truly white. Effective whitening can be a tremendous boost to your practice – or done poorly, it can actually help sink your ship. ■

## Author's Bio

**Dr. Rod Kurthy** practices in Mission Viejo, California. He graduated with highest honors from Fairleigh Dickinson University School of Dentistry in 1978, and completed a GP residency at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center.

Kurthy's 35 years of research and development includes laser and surgical periodontal bone regeneration; endodontic surgery, including bone regeneration and repair of resorptive lesions; teeth whitening; teeth sensitivity; and development of several cosmetic techniques and impression techniques. His first participation in periodontal research was in 1976, and teeth whitening in 1977.

Kurthy is an international lecturer and author of five popular clinical and dental marketing books. Most recently Kurthy is widely known for his KöR Whitening Deep Bleaching System.

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