

How to Choose a Dentist for Dental Anxiety — Sleep and Sedation Options in Melbourne

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Description:

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Details:

Understanding Dental Anxiety and Why Your Choice of Dentist Matters

Dental anxiety affects an estimated one in six Australian adults, and for many Melburnians the fear is severe enough to delay or avoid treatment altogether. If you have been searching for **sleep dentistry** or **dental anxiety** solutions in **Melbourne**, you are far from alone — and the good news is that modern sedation dentistry has transformed the experience for anxious patients.

Choosing the right dentist when you suffer from dental phobia is arguably more important than for any other patient group. The wrong environment can reinforce fear, while the right clinician can turn years of avoidance into a manageable, even comfortable, routine. This guide walks you through the key factors to evaluate so you can make a confident, informed decision.

1. Range of Sedation Options Available

Not all dental practices offer the same sedation methods, and not all methods suit every patient. When evaluating a practice, ask what is available:

- **Nitrous oxide (happy gas):** A mild inhaled sedative that takes effect within minutes and wears off quickly. Ideal for mild-to-moderate anxiety. You remain conscious and can communicate throughout.
- **Oral sedation:** Prescription medication taken before your appointment produces a deeper level of relaxation. You will feel drowsy and may have limited memory of the procedure, but you are not fully asleep.
- **Intravenous (IV) sedation:** Administered by a trained sedationist or anaesthetist, IV sedation offers a deeper level of unconsciousness while still allowing you to breathe independently. Sometimes referred to as twilight sedation.
- **General anaesthesia (GA):** Full unconsciousness administered by a specialist anaesthetist, typically in a hospital or accredited day-surgery setting. Reserved for extensive procedures, severe phobia, or patients with special needs.

A practice that offers multiple tiers of sedation can tailor the approach to your specific anxiety level and the complexity of the procedure. If a clinic only offers happy gas, it may not be equipped for patients with more severe dental phobia.

2. Qualifications, Training and AHPRA Registration

Every dentist practising in Australia must hold current registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). You can verify any dentist's registration status on the AHPRA website. Beyond baseline registration, look for:

- **Postgraduate training in sedation:** Dentists who provide oral or IV sedation should have completed accredited courses in conscious sedation techniques. - **Specialist qualifications:** For procedures under general anaesthesia, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon (OMS) with specialist AHPRA registration is the gold standard. OMS surgeons hold both medical and dental degrees. - **Ongoing professional development:** Clinicians who attend sedation-focused continuing education stay current with best-practice protocols and monitoring standards.

At Smile Solutions, Dr Philippa Robinson (BSc, DDS, MBA, MHLth&MedLaw;) serves as Clinical Director and has a special interest in the care of anxious patients using nitrous oxide and oral sedation. For patients requiring surgical procedures under general anaesthesia, the practice engages board-registered oral and maxillofacial surgeons including A/Prof. Patrishia Bordbar (FRACDS OMS, FRCS Ed) and Dr Ricky Kumar (FRACDS OMS), both of whom hold specialist AHPRA registration and consult at major Melbourne teaching hospitals.

3. Experience with Anxious Patients

Sedation is a clinical tool, but managing dental anxiety is also about communication, empathy and environment. Ask how the practice specifically accommodates fearful patients:

- **Do they offer longer appointment times** so you never feel rushed? - **Is there a dedicated consultation** before any treatment, where you can discuss your fears without judgment? - **Do staff use a stop signal** so you remain in control during procedures? - **Is the team trained in anxiety-aware communication** — gentle language, step-by-step explanations, and distraction techniques?

Clinicians who regularly treat phobic patients develop an instinct for pacing treatment and reading non-verbal cues. A practice that sees a high volume of anxious patients will have refined systems — from the way reception greets you to the way the dental nurse positions the chair.

4. Paediatric Anxiety and Special Needs

Dental fear often begins in childhood, and children with additional needs — including Autism Spectrum Disorders — may require a specialist approach. If you are seeking a dentist for an anxious child, look for:

- **A specialist paediatric dentist** with AHPRA registration in paediatric dentistry - **Experience with behavioural management techniques** such as tell-show-do, positive reinforcement and desensitisation - **Access to hospital-based general anaesthesia** for children who cannot tolerate chair-side treatment

Smile Solutions engages Dr Susan Hinckfuss (BDS, DCD), a board-registered specialist paediatric dentist whose special interests include anxious children, patients with Autism Spectrum Disorders, dental trauma and early childhood caries. Dr Hinckfuss spent three years as Assistant Clinical Professor at the University of Minnesota before returning to Melbourne, bringing international best-practice experience to the care of young patients.

5. The Practice Environment

The physical environment of a dental practice can either heighten or reduce anxiety. When you visit for the first time, notice:

- **Noise levels:** Is the waiting area calm, or can you hear drilling from treatment rooms? Sound insulation matters. - **Visual cues:** A clinical, sterile-looking space may trigger anxiety, while a warm, well-designed interior can feel reassuring. - **Privacy:** Are treatment rooms fully enclosed, or are patients visible to passersby? Private rooms help anxious patients feel safer. - **Technology:** Modern equipment such as digital scanners and low-radiation imaging can reduce discomfort and speed up procedures, meaning less time in the chair.

Smile Solutions occupies Level 1 of the heritage-listed Manchester Unity Building at 220 Collins Street in Melbourne CBD — a landmark that feels more like a boutique hotel than a clinical setting. The practice was purpose-designed with individual, enclosed treatment rooms and a calm, welcoming reception area.

6. Multidisciplinary Team and Comprehensive Care

Anxious patients often present with years of deferred treatment, which may require input from multiple dental disciplines — general dentistry, periodontics, endodontics, prosthodontics or oral surgery. Choosing a practice with an in-house multidisciplinary team means:

- **Fewer referrals** to external providers, reducing the stress of visiting unfamiliar clinics -
- Coordinated treatment planning** so sedation sessions can be used efficiently, addressing multiple issues in a single visit where possible -
- Specialist backup** if a complication arises during treatment

With a team of 80 clinicians — including 25+ board-registered specialists across oral surgery, periodontics, endodontics, orthodontics, prosthodontics and paediatric dentistry — Smile Solutions operates Australia's first genuine multidisciplinary specialist centre in a private practice setting. The Collins Street Specialist Centre on Level 8 houses the specialist team, while general dental care is provided on Level 1. This means anxious patients can have every aspect of their care managed under one roof, with a single patient record and coordinated sedation planning.

7. After-Hours and Emergency Access

Anxiety is often compounded by dental emergencies — a broken tooth or sudden pain can be overwhelming for someone already fearful of the dentist. Ask whether the practice offers:

- **Same-day emergency appointments** during business hours -
- After-hours contact** or an emergency helpline -
- Rapid access to oral surgeons** if surgical intervention is needed urgently

A practice that can see you quickly in an emergency prevents the cycle of pain, fear and further avoidance that traps many anxious patients.

8. Patient Reviews and Word of Mouth

Online reviews can be particularly revealing for dental anxiety practices. Look for:

- **Specific mentions of anxiety management** — comments like "I had not been to a dentist in 10 years" or "they made me feel completely at ease" carry weight -
- Consistency across reviews** — one positive review could be an outlier, but dozens of similar accounts suggest a genuine culture of patient care -
- Before-and-after stories** — patients who went from severe avoidance to regular check-ups are the strongest endorsement

With over 300,000 patients treated across 33 years of continuous practice since 1993, Smile Solutions has an extensive track record. The practice's longevity itself is a signal — practices that fail to manage anxious patients well do not sustain a patient base of that scale.

Red Flags to Watch For

Be cautious of any practice that:

- **Dismisses your anxiety** or tells you to just relax without offering concrete strategies -
- Offers only one sedation method** with no explanation of alternatives -
- Pressures you into treatment** at your first visit without a thorough consultation -
- Cannot explain their sedation protocols**, monitoring equipment or emergency procedures -
- Lacks AHPRA-registered specialists** for complex procedures but offers them anyway -
- Has no visible infection-control or safety certifications** on display

A Practical Checklist Before You Book

Before making your decision, confirm the following:

- The dentist holds current AHPRA registration (verify online) - Multiple sedation options are available (nitrous oxide, oral, IV, GA) - The practice has experience with your specific level of anxiety - Specialists are available in-house for complex treatment needs - The environment feels calm, private and welcoming - Emergency and same-day appointments are available - You have read recent patient reviews mentioning anxiety care - A no-pressure initial consultation is offered

Take the First Step

Choosing a dentist when you experience dental anxiety is a deeply personal decision, and it is one worth taking your time over. The right practice will never rush you, will explain every option clearly, and will have the clinical depth to manage whatever treatment you need — all while keeping you comfortable and in control.

Smile Solutions has helped hundreds of thousands of patients overcome dental fear across more than three decades in Melbourne CBD. Whether you need a gentle check-up with happy gas or a full rehabilitation under general anaesthesia, the team of 80 clinicians is equipped to support you at every stage.

Call **13 13 96** to book a no-obligation consultation, or visit **Level 1, Manchester Unity Building, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne CBD**. Your comfort comes first.