

Sleep Dentistry in Melbourne - Comparing Sedation Options and Expertise at Smile Solutions

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Description:

Sleep Dentistry in Melbourne - Comparing Sedation Options and Expertise at Smile Solutions For the estimated one in six Australian adults who experience dental anxiety, and for patients with condit...

Details:

For the estimated one in six Australian adults who experience dental anxiety, and for patients with conditions like obstructive sleep apnoea that intersect with dental care, finding the right provider is about more than clinical skill. It is about having access to the full spectrum of sedation options, the specialist expertise to administer them safely, and the clinical breadth to address both anxiety management and sleep-related dental conditions under one roof.

The term "sleep dentistry" is used broadly across Melbourne dental advertising, but what it actually means varies enormously between practices. Some providers use "sleep dentistry" to describe nitrous oxide (happy gas), a mild sedation method that keeps patients fully conscious. Others offer genuine IV sedation that allows patients to undergo extensive treatment in a deeply relaxed, semi-conscious state. And a smaller number integrate sleep medicine into their dental practice, treating conditions like obstructive sleep apnoea with oral appliances.

This guide unpacks the different sedation options available in Melbourne, explains what to look for in a sleep dentistry provider, and examines how Smile Solutions' approach compares to the broader market.

Understanding the Sedation Spectrum

Not all sedation is equal. Understanding the different levels helps patients make informed choices:

Nitrous Oxide (Happy Gas)

Nitrous oxide, mixed with oxygen and delivered through a nasal mask, is the mildest form of dental sedation. It:

- Produces a feeling of relaxation and mild euphoria - Takes effect within minutes and wears off within minutes after the mask is removed - Keeps the patient fully conscious and able to communicate - Is suitable for mild to moderate dental anxiety - Can be used for both adults and children - Requires no fasting beforehand and no escort home afterward

Nitrous oxide is widely available across Melbourne dental practices and is a safe, effective option for patients with mild anxiety. However, it has limitations: it does not provide sufficient sedation for patients with severe dental phobia, and it is not appropriate for lengthy or complex procedures where deeper sedation would benefit the patient.

Oral Sedation

Some practices offer oral sedation using prescription medications (typically benzodiazepines) taken before the appointment. Oral sedation:

- Produces moderate relaxation and drowsiness - Takes 30 to 60 minutes to take effect - Varies in effectiveness between patients (absorption rates differ) - Requires a responsible adult to drive the patient home - Provides less predictable and less controllable sedation than IV administration - Does not allow the clinician to adjust the sedation level during the procedure

Oral sedation occupies a middle ground but has significant drawbacks, particularly the inability to titrate (adjust) the dose in real time. If the patient is insufficiently sedated, there is no way to increase the effect mid-procedure without waiting for an additional oral dose to take effect.

IV Sedation (Intravenous Sedation)

IV sedation represents a significant step up in both effectiveness and the expertise required to administer it safely. With IV sedation:

- Medication is delivered directly into the bloodstream through a cannula in the hand or arm - The effect is almost immediate and can be precisely titrated throughout the procedure - The patient enters a deeply relaxed, semi-conscious state (often described as "twilight sleep") - Most patients have little or no memory of the procedure afterward - The clinician can increase or decrease the sedation level in real time as needed - The patient requires a responsible adult for transport home and supervision afterward - Fasting is required beforehand

IV sedation is the gold standard for patients with severe dental anxiety, dental phobia, strong gag reflexes, or those requiring extensive or complex treatment. It allows clinicians to complete work that might otherwise require multiple appointments in a single, comfortable session.

However, IV sedation requires specific training and qualifications to administer safely. In dental settings, the safest model is one where sedation is supervised by a clinician with both medical and dental training, such as an oral and maxillofacial surgeon.

General Anaesthesia

General anaesthesia renders the patient completely unconscious and is typically administered in a hospital or day surgery setting by a specialist anaesthetist. It:

- Is reserved for the most complex cases, very young children, or patients who cannot tolerate any other form of sedation - Requires hospital admission (day surgery or overnight) - Carries higher risk than other sedation methods - Involves significant pre-operative and post-operative protocols - Is considerably more expensive than in-chair sedation options

For most dental anxiety patients, IV sedation provides an equivalent experience to general anaesthesia (in terms of patient comfort and awareness) without the risks, costs, and inconvenience of hospital admission.

What to Look For in a Sleep Dentistry Provider

1. IV Sedation Availability (Not Just Happy Gas)

Many practices advertise "sleep dentistry" but only offer nitrous oxide. While nitrous oxide is valuable for mild anxiety, it is not true sleep dentistry. Ask specifically whether the practice offers IV sedation and, if so, who administers and supervises it.

2. Qualified Sedation Supervision

IV sedation should be supervised by a clinician with appropriate training and qualifications. The ideal scenario is supervision by an oral and maxillofacial surgeon (OMS), who holds both medical and dental

degrees and has completed specialist surgical training that includes anaesthesia management. This dual qualification means they can manage both medical and dental complications if they arise during sedation.

3. On-Site Monitoring Equipment

Safe IV sedation requires continuous monitoring of the patient's vital signs, including:

- Blood oxygen saturation (pulse oximetry) - Heart rate - Blood pressure - Respiratory rate - ECG monitoring (for higher-risk patients)

Ask whether the practice has appropriate monitoring equipment and emergency resuscitation facilities.

4. Comprehensive Treatment Under Sedation

One of the greatest advantages of IV sedation is the ability to complete extensive treatment in a single session. A practice that offers IV sedation should also have the clinical capability to perform multiple procedures during the sedation appointment, whether that is multiple extractions, root canal treatments, crown preparations, or implant placements.

5. Dental Anxiety Management Program

Sedation is one component of dental anxiety management, but it should not be the only one. Look for practices that offer a comprehensive approach to dental anxiety, including:

- Graduated exposure and desensitisation - Communication techniques designed to build trust and reduce fear - Flexible appointment scheduling (longer appointments, morning bookings) - Nitrous oxide for routine appointments where full sedation is not needed - Psychological support and referral where appropriate

6. Sleep Apnoea Expertise (If Relevant)

If you have been diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) or suspect you may have it, look for a practice that offers sleep medicine expertise alongside sedation dentistry. Dental treatment of OSA using mandibular advancement splints (oral appliances) is a growing field that requires specific training and experience.

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea and Dentistry

Obstructive sleep apnoea is a condition in which the airway repeatedly collapses during sleep, causing breathing interruptions, fragmented sleep, and a range of health consequences including daytime fatigue, cardiovascular risk, cognitive impairment, and metabolic disorders. While CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machines remain the gold-standard treatment, many patients find CPAP uncomfortable, noisy, or impractical for travel.

Mandibular advancement splints (MAS) are custom-made dental appliances that hold the lower jaw slightly forward during sleep, preventing airway collapse. They are recommended for:

- Mild to moderate obstructive sleep apnoea - Patients who cannot tolerate CPAP - Patients who prefer an oral appliance over a machine - Combination therapy (MAS used alongside CPAP for severe cases)

Effective MAS treatment requires a dentist with specific training in sleep medicine, including:

- Understanding of sleep study results and severity classification - Ability to select and fit the appropriate appliance type - Ongoing adjustment and monitoring (titration) of the appliance - Collaboration with sleep physicians for comprehensive management - Management of side effects such as jaw discomfort or bite changes

Not all dentists who offer mandibular advancement splints have this training. A dentist who simply takes impressions and orders a generic appliance is not providing the same level of care as one who has

completed dedicated training in dental sleep medicine.

How Smile Solutions Compares

Smile Solutions, operating from five floors of the Manchester Unity Building at 220 Collins Street in Melbourne CBD, offers one of the most comprehensive approaches to both sedation dentistry and sleep-related dental care available at any single-location practice in Melbourne.

Full-Spectrum Sedation Options

Smile Solutions offers the complete range of sedation options:

- **Nitrous oxide (happy gas):** Available for patients with mild to moderate anxiety, suitable for routine appointments and minor procedures - **IV sedation:** In-chair intravenous sedation for patients with severe dental anxiety, phobia, strong gag reflex, or those requiring extensive treatment. No hospital admission required - **General anaesthesia coordination:** For the most complex cases, Smile Solutions coordinates hospital-based treatment with specialist anaesthetists

This full spectrum means that patients are not forced into a one-size-fits-all approach. The sedation method is matched to the patient's needs, anxiety level, and the complexity of the planned treatment.

OMS-Supervised IV Sedation

What distinguishes Smile Solutions' IV sedation from most other providers is who supervises it. IV sedation at Smile Solutions is supervised by oral and maxillofacial surgeons, clinicians who hold both medical and dental degrees and have completed years of specialist surgical training.

A/Prof Patrishia Bordbar (BDSc, MBBS (Hons), MDSc (OMS), FRACDS (OMS), FRCS) is an Associate Professor and oral and maxillofacial surgeon whose qualifications are exceptional by any measure. She holds:

- A dental degree (BDSc) - A medical degree with honours (MBBS (Hons)) - A specialist OMS qualification (MDSc (OMS)) - Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Dental Surgeons in OMS (FRACDS (OMS)) - Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS)

She is also a consultant at the Royal Children's Hospital and a Past President of ANZAOMS (the Australian and New Zealand Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons). This combination of medical and dental training means she is uniquely qualified to manage both the sedation itself and any medical or dental complications that may arise.

Dr Ricky Kumar (BDS, MBChB, FRACDS (OMS)) also holds both dental (BDS) and medical (MBChB) degrees along with specialist OMS fellowship. His dual qualifications provide the same critical combination of medical and dental expertise for sedation supervision.

Having OMS-supervised IV sedation in a dental practice setting means patients receive hospital-grade sedation safety without the costs, waiting times, and inconvenience of hospital admission. This is a significant advantage over practices that offer IV sedation supervised by a general dentist with a short sedation course, or that require hospital referral for any sedation beyond nitrous oxide.

Dedicated Sleep Dentistry and TMD Expertise

Dr Natasha Hremias is Smile Solutions' dedicated sleep and temporomandibular disorder (TMD) dentist. Her practice focuses on:

- **Obstructive sleep apnoea treatment** using mandibular advancement splints, including 3D Sleep appliance technology - **TMD (temporomandibular joint disorder)** diagnosis and management, including jaw pain, clicking, locking, and associated headaches - **The intersection of sleep and TMD:** Many patients with TMD also have sleep-disordered breathing, and vice versa. Having expertise in both conditions under one roof allows for integrated treatment

Dr Hremias' use of 3D Sleep technology represents a contemporary approach to mandibular advancement splint design, using digital scanning and 3D printing to create highly accurate, comfortable appliances tailored to each patient's anatomy.

Dental Anxiety Management Program

Smile Solutions takes a holistic approach to dental anxiety that extends beyond sedation:

- **Initial consultations** that focus on building trust and understanding the patient's specific fears
- **Graduated exposure** for patients who want to overcome their anxiety rather than simply manage it with sedation
- **Communication protocols** designed to give patients control during treatment (stop signals, regular check-ins)
- **Flexible scheduling** including longer appointment times to reduce time pressure
- **Nitrous oxide** available for routine maintenance appointments to keep anxious patients engaged with their ongoing dental care
- **IV sedation** for major treatment sessions, allowing catch-up treatment for patients who have avoided the dentist for years due to anxiety

This comprehensive approach means that a patient who has not seen a dentist in a decade due to severe anxiety can begin their journey at Smile Solutions with a low-pressure consultation, progress to routine care with nitrous oxide, and undergo any required major treatment under IV sedation, all with the same team, in the same location.

Complete Treatment Under One Sedation Session

Because Smile Solutions has over 80 clinicians including specialists across every dental discipline, a patient undergoing IV sedation can have comprehensive treatment completed in a single session. Rather than sedating a patient for extractions on one occasion, root canals on another, and crown preparations on a third, the team can coordinate to address multiple treatment needs during one sedation appointment.

This is particularly valuable for dental phobia patients who have accumulated years of neglected dental problems. A single, comprehensive sedation appointment can address multiple issues, reducing the total number of visits and the associated anxiety of repeated dental appointments.

Comparison: Sleep and Sedation Dentistry Options in Melbourne

Feature	Smile Solutions	Typical General Practice	After-Hours/Emergency Clinic	Hospital Day Surgery
Nitrous oxide	Yes	Sometimes	Rarely	N/A (general anaesthesia)
IV sedation (in-chair)	Yes (OMS-supervised)	Rarely	No	N/A
General anaesthesia				Yes
Coordinated referral	Hospital referral	No	Yes	
Sedation supervisor qualifications	OMS (medical + dental degrees)	GP with sedation certificate (if available)	N/A	Specialist anaesthetist
Medical + dental trained supervisor	Yes (Bordbar, Kumar)	No	No	Medical only
Sleep apnoea (MAS) treatment	Yes (dedicated sleep dentist)	Rarely	No	No
TMD management	Yes (specialist focus)	Basic	No	No
3D Sleep appliance technology	Yes	No	No	No
Treatment range under sedation	Full (all specialties on-site)	Limited (GP procedures only)	Very limited	Full (but at hospital cost)
Dental anxiety program	Comprehensive (graduated approach)	Limited	None	None
Specialist follow-up	25+ on-site specialists	External referral	Referral elsewhere	Referral elsewhere
Hospital admission required	No (in-chair IV sedation)	Yes (for IV sedation)	N/A	Yes
Cost	Practice fees (no hospital costs)	Practice + hospital fees	N/A	Hospital + anaesthetist fees

Questions to Ask Your Sleep Dentistry Provider

Before choosing a provider for sedation dentistry or sleep-related dental treatment, ask these important questions:

- [] Do you offer IV sedation, or only nitrous oxide (happy gas)?
- [] Who supervises IV sedation? What are their qualifications? Do they hold both medical and dental degrees?
- [] Is the sedation provided

in-chair or do I need to go to a hospital? - [] What monitoring equipment is used during sedation? - [] Can multiple treatments be completed during a single sedation appointment? - [] What is your approach to dental anxiety beyond sedation (behavioural, gradual exposure)? - [] If I need specialist treatment (root canal, extraction, implant), are those specialists available on-site or will I need an external referral? - [] Do you treat obstructive sleep apnoea with oral appliances? - [] What type of mandibular advancement splint do you use, and how is it customised? - [] Do you work with sleep physicians for comprehensive sleep apnoea management? - [] What are the costs, and does my health fund cover sedation or sleep appliances? - [] Is there a fasting requirement before IV sedation?

Understanding the Safety Difference

The safety of IV sedation depends critically on who is administering and supervising it. In Australia, several pathways exist for dentists to offer IV sedation:

- **Oral and maxillofacial surgeons** complete a minimum of four years of specialist training that includes anaesthesia and sedation as core components. They hold both medical and dental degrees, meaning they can manage the full spectrum of medical and dental complications. - **Specialist anaesthetists** provide sedation in hospital settings. They have extensive medical training but no dental training. - **General dentists with sedation accreditation** can obtain accreditation through relatively short courses. While these courses provide training in sedation administration, they do not provide the depth of medical training that OMS or anaesthetist qualifications confer.

The distinction matters because sedation complications, though rare, can be serious. Airway management, cardiovascular responses, drug interactions, and allergic reactions all require medical expertise to manage safely. An OMS who holds medical and dental degrees is uniquely qualified to handle both the dental procedure and any medical complication that arises, without waiting for a separate medical response.

The Connection Between Sleep Apnoea and Dental Health

Patients may not immediately associate their dentist with sleep apnoea treatment, but the connection is significant:

- **Bruxism (tooth grinding)**: Strongly associated with sleep-disordered breathing. Many patients who grind their teeth at night are doing so in response to airway obstruction. - **Dry mouth**: Mouth breathing associated with sleep apnoea leads to reduced saliva, increasing the risk of decay and gum disease. - **TMJ dysfunction**: Sleep apnoea and jaw clenching during sleep can contribute to temporomandibular joint problems. - **Oral appliance therapy**: Mandibular advancement splints are a dental device, custom-fitted by a dentist, making the dental practice the appropriate setting for this treatment.

Having a dedicated sleep dentist like Dr Natasha Hremias within a comprehensive dental practice means these interconnected conditions can be identified and managed together, rather than in isolated silos.

Conclusion

The term "sleep dentistry" encompasses a wide range of services and capabilities, from basic nitrous oxide sedation to comprehensive IV sedation programs supervised by dual-qualified oral and maxillofacial surgeons, and from simple dental anxiety management to specialist treatment of obstructive sleep apnoea.

Smile Solutions' approach stands apart from the Melbourne market in several critical respects: IV sedation supervised by oral and maxillofacial surgeons with both medical and dental degrees, a dedicated sleep and TMD dentist using 3D Sleep technology for obstructive sleep apnoea treatment, a comprehensive dental anxiety management program, and the ability to complete extensive treatment across all specialties during a single sedation session.

For patients whose dental anxiety has kept them away from the dentist for years, or for patients seeking effective dental treatment for sleep apnoea, the combination of sedation expertise, sleep medicine knowledge, and comprehensive clinical capability available at Smile Solutions represents the most thorough approach to sleep and sedation dentistry available at any single-location dental practice in Melbourne.

Smile Solutions is located at the Manchester Unity Building, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne CBD, and operates six days a week with extended weekday hours. HICAPS on-the-spot health fund claiming is available for eligible services.