



Dentistry with Compassion: Specialist Takes Stress Out of Root Canals

By Ramón Rentería

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EL PASO -- Dr. Ross Fruithandler's patients often almost fall asleep in his dentist's chair.

Not that he's boring.

Fruithandler, 47, has earned a reputation over the past 20 years as a compassionate dentist whose unconventional style of dentistry has been widely applauded by his patients.

Fruithandler specializes in endodontics or, in lay terms, doing root canals, the dental procedure many of us loathe and fear.

"There's not a whole lot of the aura of stress in here," Fruithandler said recently while waiting for his next patient at his East Side office.

Fruithandler makes time to explain everything to his patients to alleviate any fears or anxiety. That is, if you're the type of patient who needs a blow-by-blow description of dental stuff.

Fruithandler points out the biggest issue is dealing with the misconception, often depicted in movies or television, that root canal therapy is painful and dreadful.

"Some patients will come in very, very nervous because of what they've heard," Fruithandler said. "Once you explain things and that you really don't want to hurt them, they understand it's not that bad of a procedure."

Patients such as Ralph Henderson, 41, a retail manager from East El Paso, love the fact that Fruithandler will call after hours to make sure everything is OK.

"He's very honest with you. This is the first dentist I've ever been that I haven't had any problems with afterward, no pain, nothing," he said. "I actually almost fell asleep in his chair while he was doing the procedures."

Fruithandler underscores his basic philosophy: "It's not that hard to devote all your attention toward the patients. They deserve it."

Once he starts a procedure, you will not see Fruithandler running in and out of the office, taking phone calls or doing anything else. He books only six or seven patients a day, all referrals from other dentists.

"We're not turning out 30 patients a day like some practices. It might not be the more efficient means of making money, but it works for me," he said. "Patients are not having to wait. That usually builds up a lot of insecurity and emotional distress."

Stephanie Del Rasso, 35, has worked 11 years with Fruithandler, managing the front office.

"He's very patient, just an all around good guy who treats everyone well," Del Rasso said.

Taking the extra step has earned Fruithandler a reputation as a dentist with compassion, a trait not always found in medicine.

In 1998, Fruithandler went to the office on Christmas Day to help a patient who was in pain.

He missed the last moments with his terminally ill father, Charles Fruithandler, a successful accountant and professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, because he was in the middle of a procedure. His family asked the receptionist to hold off on the news until he finished.

Not long ago, Fruithandler was in the stands watching his son play basketball when a player on the opposing team had a tooth knocked out. Fruithandler offered to help repair the damaged tooth. He still monitors the player's progress.

The dentist's selfless attitude impressed Ulises Alejandro, 61, a patient and Central El Paso resident.

"He really cares about his patients," he said. "You hardly feel when he is working on your teeth. He makes sure you're comfortable and that you don't have any pain."

Fruithandler also keeps colorful mobiles tethered to the ceiling, gadgets that twirl and sway, something for patients to look at beside ceiling tiles.

"A lot of new offices are setting up televisions and screens," Fruithandler said. "These mobiles have a sedating effect on patients, very soothing."

Fruithandler loves working out with his wife, Linda, traveling and going on cruises with his family. He and his sons Chad, 17, and Cory, 15, go scuba diving.

Fruithandler might not have been born in El Paso if his father hadn't grown tired of shoveling snow in New York and decided to move west.

For Fruithandler, part of the professional payoff is alleviating people of their fear of dentists and knowing that he has salvaged countless teeth that probably would have been extracted 30 years ago. While the procedure is mostly unchanged, root canal technology has improved over the years.

Fruithandler keeps doing his thing, proving that root canal therapy is no big deal and making people feel like they matter.

"It's more of a moral obligation," he said. "I have to go home and be able to sleep at night. I can't feel like I dropped the ball."

Ramón Rentería may be reached at rrenteria@elpasotimes.com; 546-6146.

Doctor's advice

- Forget any preconceived notions or what you've heard about root canal therapy.
- Give the dentist a chance to explain and prove that root canals are not as complicated or painful as some people may imagine.
- If you're not satisfied with the information you receive or if you're still intimidated by the procedure, your dentist can recommend something else, such as sedation dentistry.