

PRACTICE SUCCESS WITH A-DEC

Issue 4

thriving



Dr. Heidi T. Lee

a dec®

Rich perspective makes everything look easy



Despite an ebb in the economy, Dr. Helen Lester's tenacity paid off to create a practice that melds heart, business and a meticulous attention to detail.

"I want people to feel welcome from the moment they enter and get comfortable in the treatment room—and that's how I designed it," says Dr. Lester when asked about her newly constructed dental office which opened in 2009.

With its use of color, materials, and craftsmanship, the overall effect is simple yet elegant. You get the distinct feeling that everything—the space, the configuration, the lighting, the woodwork, the flooring—defines substance. It's sophisticated and current, yet there's nothing trendy about it.

And then there's the equipment.

Dr. Lester's five operatories are equipped with A-dec 500 chairs, Continental delivery systems for the doctor and Traditional delivery systems inside dedicated hygiene rooms. There's also a centralized sterilization center—a complete system that ensures a steady, efficient flow to accommodate continuous cycles of A-dec |W&H handpieces.

The order of her priorities? "I started with the chair and delivery," Dr. Lester says. "I quickly realized putting good money into equipment pays dividends. Not only does quality equipment help me do my job better and make my days easier, but the entire staff benefits, which ultimately makes for a favorable patient experience."



Dr. Lester's A-dec 500 chairs, she points out, allow her 5'2" frame to ease into position no matter who she's treating. "That is the biggest improvement, by far. That chair changed my life," she says. "I haven't had a backache since it's been here."

If there's a formula for Dr. Lester's arc of success, it's how well the family dentist seems to take on all facets of the practice with equal aplomb: her technology choices keep her current and efficient, her approach to asepsis and housekeeping leaves nothing to chance, and her sense of style conveys the aesthetic of pure confidence.

As a dentist who went from "teen assistant" to hygienist in the span of a decade before putting herself through dental school after age 30, Dr. Lester brings a unique perspective. Whether it's how she banters and moves easily between patients, champions personal growth among her staff, or shows excitement while describing how she turned her vision into reality, she's a natural—equal parts care provider, business owner, employer, interior designer, confidante, life coach, and the occasional impresario.

"I still relish how great this is, even a year and a half after we moved in," says the forty-something doctor, reflecting on a dental career that began when most teens were thinking about getting their drivers' licenses.

When it comes to sticking to a work ethic forged by decades of experience, Dr. Lester exudes clarity and focus. It not only shows in the way she runs her practice, but also how nothing feels out of place. There's a timeless elegance—professional without trying too hard. Like anything masterful, she makes it look easy.

"Where you work is a reflection of how you care about your job, how you care about your employees, and how you care about your patients."

Before

Q. Please tell us about your original practice.

I had just graduated from dental school and began working for a low income clinic when the doctor I knew for years—I worked for her as a hygienist before deciding to go to dental school—asked if I wanted to buy her practice. This was about 10 years ago. It was crazy, but I knew it was the perfect opportunity. Fortunately, I was able to get out of my contract. Everything truly fell into place. Four months after dental school and I was about to own my own practice. Keep in mind, it wasn't much of a practice. The doctor worked a day and a half a week. The office was three operatories in about 1,000 square feet. Within about three months, I was up and running four days a week. Looking back, it happened fast.

Q. How soon did you decide to make changes?

[Laughs.] I immediately bought all A-dec equipment—Cascade with the thick back and a Radius Continental delivery, which were great 10 years ago. But fast forward to A-dec 500, which is such a thoughtfully designed chair. Not only am I able to stay seated because of the thin back because the patient gets lower, but I think the patients are more comfortable. It's also interesting to hear the things patients say. *Everyone* loves the A-dec 500 chair.

Q. You were doing stand-up dentistry before?

I'm saying I had to stand up half the time. I'm only five-foot two and a-half. That was the main reason I wanted A-dec 500 chairs. Tall patients or large patients—I couldn't reach them. The operator chair I used in my last office would only go down so far. And I'm like this [raises arms] because the patient chair wouldn't go down to me. Keep in mind, I was very happy with my chairs—there wasn't anything better at the time. We did really well in that office, but ... oh, the restroom was literally three feet from my operatory—not good. I made sure we installed the loudest fan possible. With a space of only a thousand square feet, everything is near everything.

Q. What was the biggest challenge with your original space?

I did all I could with the old space. My brothers and I put in the floors, we painted the whole place—an office that hadn't been remodeled since 1964. The doctor who'd worked there in the '80s saw what we'd done and couldn't believe it. He said, "I had no idea this place could look this way." I gutted walls ... it's hard to describe such a dramatic transformation, but it was major. Yet ... I could only do so much, and I only had so much space.

Q. You had three operatories?

We did, and we functioned very efficiently, which is hard in a small practice. We had two doctors and one hygienist, and we even had "double hygiene" on some days. *It was small.* We were reasonably happy with it, but there was so little room for error when it came to scheduling. Making people wait was always a concern.

Lessons Learned

Q. What did you learn from your old location?

I learned a lot about space and ergonomics and how technology could make my life easier. One of the things I learned is that patients would prefer to have all their treatment in one place, with me, which means I needed the right technology and equipment. In any case, I could only go so far with the space I had. I realized I needed to make investments so that I could accommodate what the patients wanted.

Q. You have five operatories now.

It's great. I have the option to grow. Since I'm the only doctor at this point, I don't run all five at once. It's not uncommon to run four while keeping the fifth operatory for overflow. If there's a patient who has to be seen after hygiene, we have a place to treat him.

Q. How did you prioritize between equipment and technology?

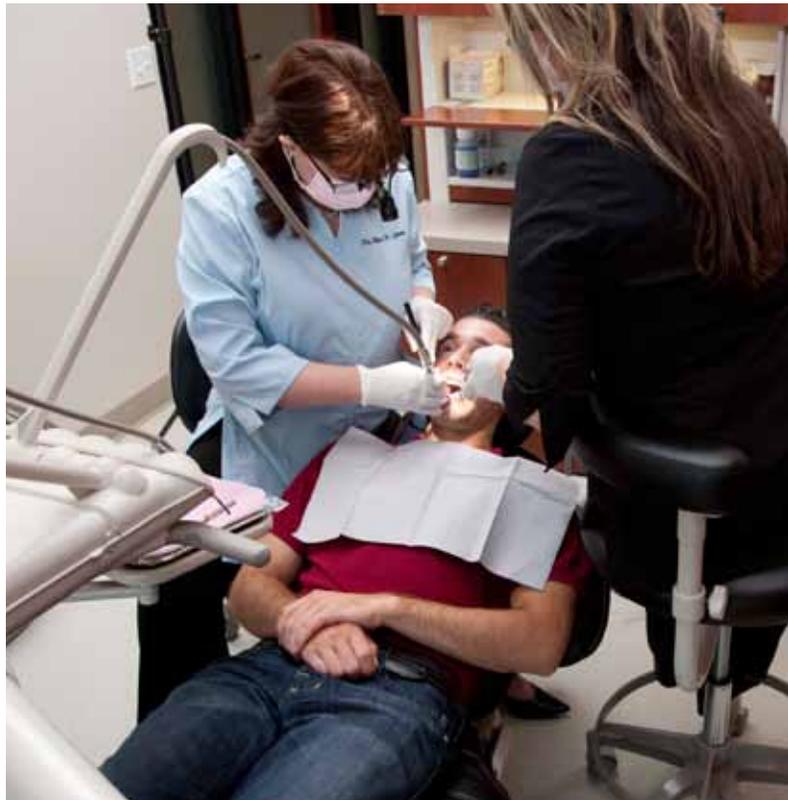
I've been fortunate enough to put money into both. I value both. But if I had to choose, I would want my equipment to be running perfectly and to be the best before I would buy new technology. I wouldn't do anything differently: I bought the newest chairs and the best handpieces, and *then* I bought the CEREC. After that, a laser and then the implant handpiece. So, I definitely buy new technology, but good equipment comes first.

Q. What made you decide to build this beautiful new practice?

Certainly the lack of space was part of it. I wanted a larger area to work in and do a better job for my patients. Stay on time, have the equipment I wanted, access the technology that would improve my practice, and my ability to take care of patients.

Q. Was there a long-term strategy?

My approach was simple: Where you work is a reflection of how you care about your job, how you care about your employees, and how you care about your patients. My goal was to provide the highest level of treatment. In terms of investing or spending, I saw the routes I could take or could've taken. Doctors either stay in the same practice for their entire career, or they go from the small to the medium to the large practice. I figured if I can pay off what I'm doing now, why would I pursue going after something larger? I'm young enough so I can pay it all off and get to enjoy it that much longer.



“I learned a lot about space and ergonomics and how technology could make my life easier.”

The Difference

Q. You're working with a chair that has a much thinner back and goes lower. Describe what that's meant for you.

Holy cow—you can quote me. Seriously, that is the biggest change for me, by far. I haven't had a backache since I've had these chairs. I was accustomed to ending my day with knots in my back or worse. To live without back pain—that's a big deal! I can get into any position I want instead of having to figure out how to finesse my body because the chair won't go a certain way or my stool won't go up or down. And if I'm making adjustments, so is the assistant, which creates another set of challenges. Any time I can eliminate someone bending, twisting, reaching ... I'm all for it. Now I can be at 12-o'clock and everything works with me. I just move the chair to that position, and adjust the head rest, which I could never do before. Before, every single day involved me compromising my position.

Q. Any *Big Picture* epiphanies?

I love this place every time I walk in. I say to myself, "Holy cow, this is so beautiful. Wow. This is where I work." Even after a year and a half, I still relish how great this is. I feel like I created something that will never feel out of date, a result of sticking to classic architectural principles and calming colors.

Q. How have you benefited from a workflow standpoint?

We have the operatories and know how to turn them over efficiently. Before, if I had one doctor operatory, it took 15 minutes to turn. Now if I'm running over even a little bit, which I always do, we can kind of fake it. I can always pop over and anesthetize someone, or the hygienist can anesthetize them. We can take some impressions that may be necessary with a second assistant.



X-Factors

Q. When you were in the construction phase, the economy was facing a lot of troubling news.

Yeah, but my plans began before things started to change. There was a period when I wondered what I was getting myself into. *What am I doing?* Eventually, though, I decided there was no looking back. I was moving forward.

Q. You must've had a lot of confidence to keep moving forward and make it happen.

That's sweet to call it confidence—and I think that's what it was. I *did* have faith that everything would work out. I realized that if I fail at something, it's not really failure because there's always a learning opportunity. If you really love what you do, how could you not succeed? On one hand, the economy was horrible and I'm spending a big chunk of money. On the other hand, I knew I would be okay even if I didn't increase production. I kept reminding myself that most doctors increase production 15% to 20% whenever they move their practice. Granted, these figures probably apply during a decent economy, but I knew going in that I didn't need an increase for it to make financial sense. I also knew that if I waited until the recession was over, everything would be more expensive and who would know when that would be? Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing. It was the right move in so many ways: a healthier practice, a great place to arrive every day, better equipment and space, and everyone enjoys it so much more.

Q. Comparing your old location to this, what's the biggest difference overall?

I don't spend as much time in the practice. Isn't that interesting? It's true.

Q. And why is that?

Everything is so organized. Everything is so easy to take care of. Procedures don't take as long, because everything fits me better. In the old office I was always looking for where things were. I could never find anything. And I don't mean the assistant's weren't doing their job. The cabinetry wasn't A-dec, the space didn't allow for that. It's a case of a lot of little things adding up. I couldn't find things easily. Even something as simple as gloves. Here, gloves are exactly where they should be.

Q. In the scheme of things, gloves seem so simple.

Gloves *are* simple, but it's an example of how a lot of little things add up to help create a great work environment. I hadn't thought about it until now, but I'm not as stressed as I used to be, which I attribute to a lot of factors. We've created a well thought-out environment; it's an efficient set up with good equipment—the combination of everything helps us help the patient. The other part is the people I work with every day. They're not only here because of a paycheck. They understand the mission. I feel like they have a sense of ownership.

Q. Any other surprises?

Flow. The flow is so good. I don't know how it could be better. The sterilization is in the perfect spot. Patients don't have to walk by it all the time. They don't even notice it—but who cares if they do—it's perfect looking. In some ways, I wish they would pay more attention. It's a patient confidence-builder. With all of its importance and reassurance, it's something I'm proud of. Rarely do we have to go in the sterilization room during a procedure because we have everything in our operatories. Everything has a perfect home and—yes—the flow is amazing.

The Patients

Q. Do your patients like the new facility?

They love it. They will come early to sit by the fireplace and read. I have not heard one person complain about a waiting time. And I enjoy going out to talk to the patient if we're running late; I always go out myself. It's not uncommon for someone to say, "Oh we're fine, we're really enjoying your waiting room." That's what it's there for—to enjoy.

Q. And you're getting new patients. What would you say are the top contributing factors?

Because they look in the window [laughs]. But, actually, people notice that it's nice here. Maybe they assume, rightfully so, that someone who cares enough to present well—to present a clean, organized space—they'll also be a good dentist who pays attention to the details. I'm also excited about how I was able to have a place that's a genuine reflection of who I am. Patients from the old office would say it didn't match me as a person, which was very true. People are perceptive. I don't curl my hair or wear heels to work—that's not the aesthetic. Instead, think of clean, tidy, timelessness. That's who I am.

Q. In the old place, how long would you say patients waited?

They waited about 10 to 30 minutes.

Q. And now?

I think I've had only two patients wait for longer than 10 minutes. That's two times in 18 months. We are on time.



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