

New Accreditation Helps You Measure Your Cosmetic Dentist's Skill & Experience

by Laurie Entrekin



Virtually all Americans believe a nice smile is an important social asset. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that the popularity of cosmetic dental procedures is growing. According to one recent survey, dentists report that they have seen a more than 15 percent increase in patient spending on cosmetic procedures over the last five years. That's a significant trend for patients and dentists alike.

Regardless of how it forms initially—that germ of an idea or longing to repair a cracked tooth, straighten front teeth or brighten the color of teeth—eventually a decision is made to “just do it.” Then the question becomes, “How do I choose a qualified cosmetic dentist?”

As few as 20 years ago, there was no credentialing process or board certification for cosmetic dentists. Therefore, there was no real standard that dentists could be measured against to gauge their level of skill and experience in the area of cosmetics. This is not to say there were no good cosmetic dentists around—only that it was more difficult to sort the very good cosmetic dentists from the average or poor.

Now, thanks to a group of forward-thinking individuals who formed an organization in the mid-1980s dedicated to continuing education for cosmetic dentistry, there is a credentialing body for cosmetic dentistry. It's called the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD). With a stringent accreditation process that includes several stages, including the completion of three workshops, the passing of a written exam, the practical application of one's knowledge and skill through the completion of five unique cosmetic dental cases within five years, and the passing of an oral exam—only about 250 dentists are currently certified.

Dr. James A. Merriman, a cosmetic dentist in Marietta, received his official notification of accreditation from the AACD in February. He is one of five accredited cosmetic dentists in Georgia, an elite group. “It was quite a com-

mitment,” Merriman admits, sharing that he began the accreditation process in 1999.

According to Merriman, the five cases that are included in the accreditation process are “beautifully designed” to test what a cosmetic dentist would face. “You've got to perform everything from complete smile makeovers to those ‘matching nature,’ or treating one or two teeth to tie in seamlessly with the natural teeth. The fifth case requires you to use a bridge or implant to replace a missing front tooth. This is the most difficult case to do and the one for which it is most difficult to find a patient. In your photo documentation of the case, if it looks like the patient has lost a tooth and it's been repaired, you don't pass—it's got to look like the person has never lost a tooth.”

Of the accreditation, Merriman says, “Because people are demanding these services more and more, it is becoming more important to have this accreditation. It's a way for people to measure or compare one dentist to another. I think it's great that they've come up with a way to educate people on choosing a cosmetic dentist.”

He adds, “The most important advice I can give patients is to be discerning. Ask the dentist, ‘How many cosmetic cases have you done?’ ‘How much of your practice is cosmetic dentistry versus general dentistry?’ and, of course, ‘Are you accredited by the AACD?’ You should also ask your dentist, ‘Can you show me photographs of cases you've done that are like mine?’ This is a really important question if you are having a cosmetic procedure done.”

In fact, photography is so important to the AACD's credentialing process that Merriman and other applicants had to take a workshop on documenting dental cases. “You have to take the pictures precisely at the right angles and make sure that they are in focus,” says Merriman. “The examiners who are critiquing the cases are very particular about the pho-