

M2:

A Different Kind of Dentistry



By Brent Urmey / Photography by Silas Crews

"We're going to the dentist."

When I was a kid, that phrase did not rank highly among the things my parents said to me. It was way down there with "Eat your vegetables" and "Now, eat the vegetables you hid in your shoe." I didn't have dental phobia or anything—the dentist's office was just always so *sterile* and *unpleasant*. The only smiles to be found were in stock photographs and worn magazines.

Imagine my surprise when, walking up to *M2 Dentistry*, three eager children barreled past me in their race to be first inside. Didn't they know where they were?

The Good Doctor

As a matter of fact, those kids knew exactly where they were. And, more importantly, they knew who they were

there to see: pediatric dentist Dr. Maria Meliton. Dr. Meliton is the gentle, guiding force behind M2 Dentistry and she has crafted it into a dental practice unlike any other. Her bubbly personality and rosy-cheeked charm make it easy to see why children adore her.

"They love Maria," says parent Allison Hess, whose children have been M2 patients for four years. Her daughter has developed a genuine bond with Dr. Meliton; "They're always looking at each other's jewelry, there's Girl Talk," she laughs. The kids get so excited about appointments that Allison tells them a week in advance...and then it's all they can think about.

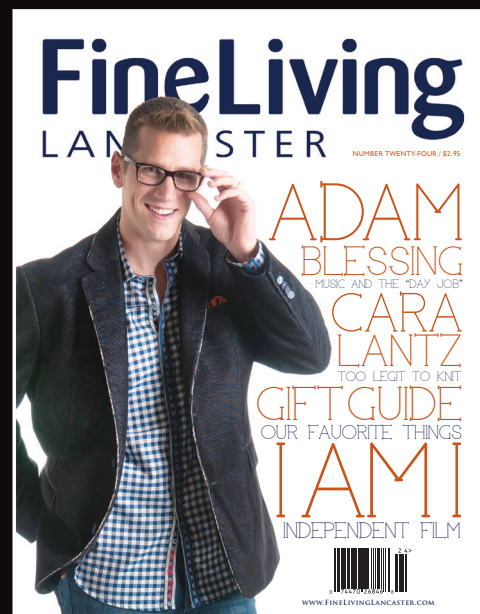
Dr. Meliton's rapport with children goes a long way toward making them feel more comfortable in the



face of dental procedures, but that's only part of the story. A degree in psychology lends her an advantage in her field, and she regularly applies that learning to understand, motivate, and direct her patients. "I can't give away all of my secrets," she tells me, "but many of my success stories are based on using the right type of psychology."

Partnering with Dr. Meliton is the enthusiastic and affable Dr. Lee Patalowski, a general dentist who has two decades of experience in treating patients with special needs. It's difficult work; special needs patients often struggle with communicating or with controlling their emotions, so it's very important to help them

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Published in **Fine Living Lancaster**
Issue Number Twenty-Four • November, 2012

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feel safe and comfortable. Dr. Patalowski is also passionate about custom mouth guards, which now go way beyond tooth protection and into the realms of posture and performance enhancement. You'd seriously be amazed at what they can do.

A Site for Sore Teeth

Shaping a child's dentist experience begins at the door, which is bad news for the clinical white-on-white offices with furnishings from the '70s. M2, on the other hand, is upbeat, modern, and stylish. "People walk in and say, 'Wow!'" Bedecked in a purple and green motif, Dr. Meliton's practice is both eye-catching and innovative. The design was recently selected for a book on healthcare spaces, due out in 2013.

"Most offices are designed by the same dental supply companies," Dr. Meliton confides, which accounts for the

uniformity that plagues (plaques?) the industry. When planning M2, she enlisted the aid of architects from Lancaster and Washington, D.C. to create something fresh and cozy, a home away from home.

There's a purposeful openness built into the design that allows parents to be with their children for support, when necessary, and gives them the opportunity to observe the cleanliness of the office and the sterilization station—"nothing I wouldn't use in my own mouth!" And, perhaps the greatest benefit, the children can see each other. "Modeling really works with kids," says Dr. Meliton. When they see other kids behaving and enjoying their visits, they're less likely to act out.

Thoroughly Modern Maria

Of course, there are other incentives for good behavior. A treasure-filled Prize Room...endless rolls of stickers..."and let's be honest, the video games are a *big* draw," laughs Dr. Meliton. Kids know they'll only get to play that *one more level* if they're obedient. And, by featuring virtual games instead of physical toys, there's minimal clean up and no risk of toy-related injuries—*Lego Batman* is much more fun onscreen than underfoot.

M2 also makes use of ceiling-mounted flat screens, positioned above and slightly behind the dentists' chairs at a seemingly odd angle. This, too, is by design; each screen is placed so that the patient has to angle his head just right to see it. "Everything falls into place," explains Dr. Meliton. "That's the perfect position for us to work."

Cutting-edge technology is the standard at M2. Panoramic digital X-rays, paperless systems...Dr. Meliton has even had patients text her with photos of their mouth for quick advice. "We're forward thinking, we're always looking for the next thing," she tells me.

"We even have a laser that detects cavities," adds Dr. Patalowski. He demonstrates a device the size and shape of a pen. It not only finds cavities, it tells him how deep they are and whether or not they need treatment. He grins. "Kids think it's like a video game." Think about that the next time you're playing Minesweeper.

Patients First

As modern as her practice may be, Dr. Meliton feels that "old-fashioned" values belong at the core. Forming relationships, building trust, spending time with patients instead of rushing to fill some quota—"I'm not going to sacrifice a child's comfort, or a parent's time, just so I can make more money," she says.

M2 deliberately avoids taking a "big business" approach, where patients don't get the attention they deserve. In practices that follow that model, much of the dental work, including filling cavities, is handed off so that dentists can see (or at least glimpse) more patients. Dr. Meliton has a policy of consistency: whoever does the consultation, does the work. "We model our practice on how dentistry used to be practiced...one patient at a time."

Dr. Meliton encourages patients to begin with a "get to know us" visit. It lets them "test the waters," meet her staff, and tour the office, while presenting her with an opportunity to dispel fears and misconceptions in an office that isn't scary or boring. And best of all, it gives kids a reason to be excited when they hear those words...

"We're going to the dentist!" 🦷

Published in **Fine Living Lancaster**
Issue Number Twenty-Four • November, 2012

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