

# GREEN DENTISTRY: Madison practices find multifaceted value in sustainability

Brenna Sadler, Director of Membership & Communications [bsadler@wda.org](mailto:bsadler@wda.org)

**Dr. Benjamin Farrow**, owner of Monroe Street Family Dental in Madison, says his practice has a “big picture” mentality.

“We understand how important dental health is to whole body health and believe that preventative care is more than just flossing and brushing,” he said. “We believe that what’s good and healthy for the individual is often good for the community and the planet, and vice versa.”

Four miles away, just past the Capitol Square, a mission to “optimize the health and happiness of our patients, team members, suppliers, community and the environment through exceptional quality care and sustainable business practices” has propelled **Dr. Nicole Andersen** and her team at Artisan Dental to take innovative steps like becoming a Certified B Corporation, achieve carbon neutral status and more.

Both Madison dentists say committing to green dentistry has helped them build strong practices with growing, satisfied patient bases and teams. They want their colleagues across the state to realize how smoothly sustainability can be built into a modern dental practice, and to



**Dr. Benjamin Farrow**, pictured here with the team at Monroe Street Family Dental, built his neighborhood-focused practice with sustainability in mind.

recognize the business and social benefits of a sustainable approach.

They discussed their respective takes on green dentistry.

## ■ Why have you made a decision to focus on sustainability within your practice?

**Dr. Farrow:** We had the luxury of being able to start our practice from scratch in 2009, and a big part of it was establishing our core values, especially those that would connect well with those in our market, those in the neighborhood. We were able to look at sustainability from the start, from a design and construction standpoint. It was exciting to be thinking in a slightly unique kind of way about how to provide dental care.

**Dr. Andersen:** Providing exceptional quality care using sustainable business practices to benefit our patients, team members, suppliers, community and planet stakeholders is our mission. In that a sustainable framework focuses on creating economic, environmental and social value, there was natural alignment with our mission to create multidimensional impact.



## GREEN DENTISTRY AT WORK

Here’s a sampling of the green dentistry initiatives Dr. Benjamin Farrow and his team have in place at Monroe Street Family Dental, the only Wisconsin practice to be Gold Certified by the Eco-Dentistry Association ([www.ecodentistry.org](http://www.ecodentistry.org)).

### DURING CONSTRUCTION

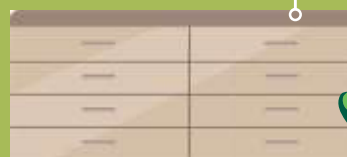
- > Recycled construction waste
- > Reclaimed products – pillars, floors, furniture and terrazzo floors
- > Low VOC (volatile organic compounds) cabinetry, adhesives, and paints

- > Flooring made from sustainable products – Marmoleum, recycled carpet
- > High quality, refurbished dental office equipment

### EVERYDAY OPERATIONS

- > Waterless vacuum – saves one gallon of water per minute

- > Amalgam separator – eliminates mercury from wastewater
- > Low-flow faucets and low-water usage toilets – 16,500 gallons saved per year
- > Waterless alcohol hand sanitizer – saves paper towels and water



*“Patients have told us they have selected, remained with and referred friends to Artisan Dental because of our sustainability principles and B Corporation certification. We even see written positive feedback in online patient reviews.”*

*- Dr. Nicole Andersen*

**■ What would you say are some of the more important sustainability steps your practice has taken?**

**Dr. Andersen:** The single most important step we’ve taken is to become a Certified B Corporation. The certification evaluates a business’s sustainability practices to determine if it is creating value for its stakeholders. It covers the three primary pillars of a sustainable framework – social, economic and environmental impacts. The assessment has been both a confirmation of many of the sustainability practices we have in place, such as robust and meaningful compensation, and an inspiration to create more positive impact. For example in 2020, we became the first general dentistry practice in the U.S. to become carbon neutral (see related story on page 14).

**Dr. Farrow:** It’s critical to engage your entire team around the conversation – it has to be part of the operational culture. I think one of the most important steps is looking at all your infection control and packaging and processing systems and thinking about what can be reused, what can be autoclaved, what can be made from a biodegradable materials – looking at everything you can do to reduce plastic. For example, we use cloth pouches that can be autoclaved to wrap most instruments. That’s one less piece that goes into the trash each time.

We also save a ton of paper by doing everything digitally. From digital radio graphs, and scanning instead of impressions, to our practice management software, charts, billing – all digital.

**■ How have those steps improved your business?**

**Dr. Farrow:** It underscores that our practice, our care, is not a commodity. I think that people can easily commoditize dentistry – they’re looking for the most convenient location, the best insurance match. It’s not that those things don’t matter at all, but there are greater reasons why patients choose our office. And I’ll tell you, it’s a whole lot more enjoyable to provide dentistry for people who want to be here for reasons besides convenience and cost. If they like



**Dr. Nicole Andersen** says everyone at Artisan Dental has a role in the practice’s commitment to sustainability.


the people and feel our values match theirs, it’s a much easier relationship.

**Dr. Andersen:** One of the most tangible impacts is that within a highly competitive marketplace we have grown from one dentist in 2014 to four dentists today. The growth occurred organically without the aid of external marketing since 2016. We have also received positive feedback from team members about how our mission, vision and values speak to them personally, leading to low turnover and the ability to attract high-caliber candidates when we have an opening.


**■ How have patients reacted to your green dentistry initiatives?**

**Dr. Andersen:** Patients have told us they have selected, remained with and referred friends to Artisan Dental because of our sustainability principles and B Corporation certification. We even see written positive feedback in online patient reviews.

*Continued on page 12...*




- > Digital radiographs – no chemicals for processing or paper filing
- > Steam sterilization – no chemicals
- > Paperless charting
- > Reusable dental products (vs. disposable) with minimal packaging
- > Non-toxic cleaning products and disinfectants




**ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES**


- > Implemented an employee “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” program, including all reusable flatware and dishes
- > Participate in Energy Conservation
- > Selected Energy Star appliances



- > Installed fluorescent, motion sensor-activated lights
- > Purchase energy from renewable sources through Madison Gas & Electric Green Power program
- > Maximize use of natural light
- > Improve fresh air intake on programmable heating and cooling system



- > Employ Smart Patient Products
- > Distribute minimal handouts and then only those made from recycled paper products
- > Purchase toothbrushes made from recycled yogurt containers
- > Stock waiting area with children’s toys made responsibly with recycled and renewable products







*“I feel pretty strongly that most patients want to see some of their values reflected in the businesses they support. It’s been a helpful way to connect with patients and maintain trust and loyalty.”*

*- Dr. Benjamin Farrow*

...continued from page 11.

**Dr. Farrow:** I think everybody feels better about it. I feel pretty strongly that most patients want to see some of their values reflected in the businesses that they support. It’s been a helpful way to connect with patients and maintain trust and loyalty.

**■ Do you think today’s dental offices are taking sustainability seriously? Why or why not?**

**Dr. Farrow:** I would say it’s probably wildly variable. This moment, with COVID-19, is a tough one. I’m pretty sure the average dental office has more to consider right now than keeping sustainable.

Because of the pandemic, I don’t think we’re going to see a big, profession-wide discussion of sustainable dentistry right now. But it wouldn’t surprise me if we had that conversation two or three years from now.

**Dr. Andersen:** It seems less than 5% of practices have appreciated the full opportunity sustainable principles offer their practices, patients, team members, community and environment. There are also very few dental suppliers and distributors innovating around sustainability principles in terms of product or service design, or how sustainability principles can inform organizational or business model design.

Similarly, I see only occasional coverage of the topic by dental journals, dental media, dental schools or professional associations. When there is mention, it is usually only a discussion of environmental topics, without a larger appreciation of the system-based interdependencies between environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability. I also notice there is not an articulation of the many benefits for a business when it harvests the synergies that can be created among various stakeholders when serving a higher purpose.

**■ How would you recommend a dental office approach becoming more green?**

**Dr. Andersen:** One of the most important first steps is to reflect on why the practice wants to become more green. This may relate to an existing mission statement or perhaps a new purpose the office may create. A clear “why” will more naturally lead to creative engagement and long-term commitment.

Next, I would encourage creating a “Green Team” of team members and senior leadership that meets regularly to plan and implement sustainability initiatives. Forming this team will enhance the overall organization culture and allow individuals to act on initiatives that may be personally meaningful to them, while also creating opportunities to build new skills.

I would suggest contacting the Wisconsin Sustainable Business Council ([www.wisconsinustainability.com](http://www.wisconsinustainability.com)) to learn about its free resources, including the “Green Masters” program. I would also recommend the B Impact Assessment, the complimentary assessment used to certify B corporations, offered by B Lab ([www.bcorporation.net](http://www.bcorporation.net)). Green Masters and the B Impact Assessment will provide an excellent overview of a practice’s status from a sustainability perspective as well as tangible ideas for improvement.

**Dr. Farrow:** I would take a dedicated team meeting and I’d write on the board three different areas. Let’s look at how we do things in the front of the office, let’s look at how we do things in providing patient care, and let’s look at how we do things in sterilization. Then brainstorm – what things can we imagine that would use less energy and water and generate less waste? If you ask those simple questions, you’ll start to get good answers.

