

View from the bench



Dental technician Peter Wagon emphasises the importance of finding the right laboratory for your needs and stresses that communication is the key to success

A couple of years after I first set up a lab, I went to see one of my first clients to discuss some cases that had not gone as well as we both had hoped. We talked about the cases and I promised that any problems could be rectified as he turned and dumped a three inch high pile of flyers, brochures and laboratory pricelists on the desks saying, 'Please do Pete, as I get these every day and I don't really want to change labs'.

Fortunately I'm still working with that dentist 10 years later but I did learn that day quite how much competition is out there and what a bewildering choice dentists have when picking a laboratory. So in this article I will try to point out some of the things you should be looking for and what you should expect from a lab.

I would like to say that you should only use a lab that has a cheerful Londoner called Pete as director, but sadly this isn't a necessity. The best lab is the one set up in your surgery. I know I learnt more and my work improved quickest when I was working in the laboratory in Dr Theo Hanley's attic in Dublin, where communication was simple and I could see my work fitted in the mouth. Of course this ideal is not possible for most and for many dentists in Ireland postal work is the only option for more complex cases. But with digital photography and email, something close to this level of communication is now simply achieved.


All laboratories in Ireland and the UK should have an EU Medical Devices Directive statement and registration number on their lab docketts.

The Directive requires that labs have a full production manual, ensuring that procedures and techniques are carried out correctly, that there is a paper trail to prove that all materials used are of a satisfactory standard, and proof that technicians are properly trained.

Inspection and accreditation have been slow but any lab that has followed the guidelines through should be happy to let you have a copy of their manual.

Be sure that the lab you are sending your work to is actually doing the work themselves. I'm not referring to smaller labs that might, for example, send out their all-porcelain copings to be made by a larger lab, then veneer the crowns themselves. We offer this service to some excellent labs who offer a first-

rate service. I am talking about the 'labs' that act as little more than shipping agents, taking in work and sub-contracting it to labs in China and the Far East, where the materials and workmanship aren't as closely regulated as within the EU.

Once you are happy that the lab is bona fide, try to find a contact who you feel you can comfortably talk to and get on with, maybe not so much that you ask them to Christmas dinner and to go on holiday with you but rather with whom you can communicate successfully. After all, you may be talking to them a couple of times a week for 20 or 30 years and if things are working well between you, they can save you a lot of heartache and frustration when crown-fitting time comes around. 

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