

In the chair with Geoffrey Speiser

By Peter Weiniger



Peter Weiniger

One in three of us have some form of bad breath. But before you cover your mouth, reach for the mints, or feel you're destined to live as a social outcast, it's all treatable. So says Sydney dentist, Dr Geoffrey Speiser, director of Australian Breath Clinic.

Dr Speiser first became alarmed at the prevalence of bad breath among his patients in 1997 and the absence of any real dental answers to the problem. A self-confessed internet buff, he went online seeking answers, and there in cyberspace made contact with a dentist in the United States, who ran a bad breath clinic. The two practices soon joined forces and gradually over the years, they began developing a range of improved products to treat the various forms of breath odour.

The big breakthrough came in mid-2000 with the development of Oral Chroma that Dr Speiser describes as a "quantum leap in testing machinery that enabled us to get specific readings from patients' mouths and more accurately target treatment".

"We could now clearly see where the problem was coming from in the mouth," Dr Speiser says.

Oral Chroma accurately measures the various mouth gases, including those related to periodontal disease, in as little as 10 minutes, he says. The device is based on gas chromatography – the same technology being used to detect the presence of cancer compounds in people's breath – and can break down a sample of mouth air into as many as 50 individual gases.

The next step for Dr Speiser was to get the message out, and at the same time convince a sceptical dental profession to take bad breath treatment seriously.

"The profession isn't yet sufficiently aware of what we do," Dr Speiser regrets. "It's seen as the poor cousin to all the dental practices. Most clinics just sell fresh breath products. I don't know any other practice in the country that is a specialist bad breath clinic."

He estimates that outside of Australia, there are about three or four specialist bad breath clinics in America, one in Canada, one in the UK and one in Malaysia.

To get the message out about Oral Chroma, Dr Speiser decided that the best way was to go directly to the consumers and let them decide. "A public relations campaign seemed the best alternative because it involved education," Dr Speiser says.

A successful marketing strategy was devised which saw the virtues of Oral Chroma demonstrated on top rating television current affairs programs, such as Today Tonight as well as various daytime shows. And that, according to Dr Speiser, was when the message really got out.

"Our phones rang hot for weeks. We had 60,000 hits on our web site in the first few hours after appearing on the Today Tonight show," Dr Speiser recalls. "We had to stop doing dentistry for three months, just fulfilling



orders. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

"Ever since, we have had a constant flow of enquiries on our website"

The success of the campaign confirmed the age-old adage of 'being in the right place with the right product at the right time'. Another significant ingredient was the relatively low cost of the campaign. "Getting on the internet early was really important," Dr Speiser says.

With about 2,500 hits a day, Dr Speiser has been able to develop allied products, growing the website from simply a bad breath site into an oral health site offering products ranging from probiotics to toothpastes, mouth washes and tongue cleaners. "We can now live off these lines, rather than traditional dentistry," Dr Speiser says.

The next challenge for Dr Speiser is breaking down the psychological barriers and taboos that inhibit the treatment of bad breath. "You know," he says, "we couldn't get a patient to go on television during our campaign because of the stigma around bad breath that implies it's caused by poor hygiene as a result of someone not cleaning their teeth.

"The message we need to get out is that bad breath is due to a bacterial imbalance, which only sometimes is due to poor oral hygiene, but not always."

A first step could be getting more dentists onside. At present, most referrals to Dr Speiser's practice come from doctors, predominantly ear, nose and throat specialists and gastroenterologists.

He would also like to see more dentists taking up bad breath treatment. He issues the following invitation. "If there are any forward thinking dentists out there interested in taking up bad breath treatment, feel free to call me." ◆

Peter lectures in journalism at RMIT and is a former senior journalist at *The Age*.