

# Finding the **right spot** for a practice

By Anne Levitch



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We frequently take calls from practitioners who are wishing to purchase a site or tenancy for their practice. Not surprisingly, the majority, have no idea of the statutory controls which apply in many situations. Town planning statutes can vary considerably over time and are mostly becoming increasingly restrictive.

Just because there is a practice next door, down the road, or across the road, does not mean a new practice will be allowed in the vicinity. I thought it might be beneficial to run through the various factors that need to be considered when searching for the right 'spot' to set up a new dental practice.

Due to the limits of space, this column will address primarily the physical and statutory issues, as the business decision has as many variables as there are practitioners.

## ZONING

The local council sets up zones in every locality where they establish the commercial hub of the precinct. This is primarily to support the quiet amenity of surrounding residential areas, which are then serviced by a central business district (CBD) and regional centers for retail, business and commercial needs.

A dental practice will not be allowed in all zones. Some councils may allow a 'small' dental practice in a suitable residential zone, but generally with severe limitations to growth. In some precincts Councils will actually prohibit healthcare services. They may want retail showrooms, industrial services etc. in these locations.

It is critically important to check the suitability of the site and zone with council prior to committing to any land, property purchase or tenancy lease.

## SIZE AND SPACE

A general rule of thumb for working out the overall spatial requirements for a practice is to multiply 35 - 45 square metres by the number of surgeries and consult rooms you need. For example if you want 4 surgeries with one separate non clinical consultation room, you should be looking for tenancies in the vicinity of 175 (5x35) - 225 (5x45) m<sup>2</sup> of internal area. A tenancy of 180 m<sup>2</sup> will need to be more 'compact' than one that is 220m<sup>2</sup> to accommodate all the necessary functional areas.

For land, it is generally preferable where possible, from a usability and investment perspective, to find land lot larger than 1,000m<sup>2</sup>. A lot this size would require a minimum of 4-6 surgeries to warrant this kind of investment.

There will be council setback limitations from front, side and rear, which will establish the available building envelope. It is beneficial to work with a minimum side setback of 3m as building any closer to the boundary will trigger stringent fire safety requirements, generally limiting windows and openings.

You will need to allow for car parking and vehicular circulation on the site. To allow sufficient space for vehicles to enter and exit in a forward direction, turning bays and parking space are required. A multiple of 35m<sup>2</sup> per vehicle is a useful rule of thumb.

The building footprint will also be 10 - 20% greater than the usable internal area, this allows for wall thickness, entry foyers, etc.

An example for a 4 surgery practice + non clinical consultation room, on a block of 20m x 50m:

Front setback of 6 metres	120m <sup>2</sup>
Side setbacks of 3 metres (building only)	150m <sup>2</sup>
Rear setback of 2 metres	40m <sup>2</sup>
Building internal area	220m <sup>2</sup>
Allowance for foyers, wall thickness etc	40m <sup>2</sup>
Car parking for 12 cars (12 x 35m <sup>2</sup> )	420m <sup>2</sup>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>990m<sup>2</sup></b>

## VISIBILITY

It is important to make sure a practice is 'visible' to the area it services. While it is of course preferable to build a patient base by having a practice which potential patients are attracted to visit by having 'seen' it, these sites usually come with premium purchase or rental costs. A successful practice can also be built in less costly, less visible locations as long as the practice invests in 'visibility' through continued marketing.

## PARKING

Parking can be the primary bugbear in finding suitable sites as most councils will require 4-5 car spaces for each practitioner on site. If this is not available for the potential site, it can be argued successfully. However, this process can be protracted and costly as traffic studies / traffic engineering reports are often required, neighbours generally complain and there is no guarantee of success.

The exception to this requirement is in highly built up CBD areas where public parking stations or public transport is the readily available.

## HELP FROM AGENTS

Briefing a commercial agent with requirements can be of great assistance in finding a site. A brief needs to include site / floor area needed, distance from public transport (considered for patients and staff), proposed lease period, parking requirements, visibility, disabled access requirements, preferred aspect / outlook etc. Once they find a site that has potential, they can follow up in providing more detail for consideration such as tenancy manuals, lease terms, floor plans, sections of building etc.

Once a potential site has been found, there are a number of further requirements that are necessary to ensure the site is suitable for the proposed practice.

We will look at the SITE CHECKLIST in the next column. ♦

