



A perfect smile?

THE LURE AND PRICE OF COSMETIC DENTISTRY

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From next to nothing ten years ago we will spend £360m on cosmetic dentistry in 2006. **LUCIA VAN DER POST**, who has had her teeth whitened three times, explains why a gleaming mouth is worth the expense

I am strangely obsessed with teeth. At parties I used to look at eyes – now I beam in on the jaws of my fellow guests. Usually I'm astounded at how many people are still walking around with teeth that overlap, that are crooked, that are too yellow or that sport obvious gaps.

If ever I'm home on a Thursday night, I am to be found transfixed by the Ten Years Younger programme on Channel 4, in which a succession of slightly depressed-looking women are transformed from drab and dowdy lumps to sleek and shiny go-getters. They are given everything from complete facelifts and tummy tucks to microdermabrasion, Botox, new wardrobes, make-up and hairdos – but of the whole box of tricks, the single thing that makes most difference in peeling away the years is having their teeth fixed. The change in their appearance usually reduces them to tears.

Admittedly, most of the guinea pigs have simply terrible teeth. Until I watched the programme I had no idea that in 21st-century Britain there are people who simply never brush their teeth. And not only that – there are people who walk around with huge gaps in their gums, with hideous pointy sticks instead of proper, pearly teeth. There are people whose teeth are so bad that they are afraid to go out and never dare to smile.

Rather less disturbing are those whose teeth are basically in good condition but who would look better if those teeth were more even or a better colour. Today, these things can be fixed in a trice.

The snag is that cosmetic dentistry doesn't come cheap. But these days the techniques are there to give everybody who wants one (and can pay for it) a million-dollar smile. Dentists offering the treatments are opening fancy salons on almost every high street in the land. The old austere and rather grim surgeries are being replaced by posh clinics with fancy names, offering all sorts of additional blandishments such as aromatherapy, a touch of stimulating massage or a little reflexology.

In part, it is programmes such as Ten Years Younger (and, of course, the dazzling smiles of Hollywood stars) that are responsible for the boom in cosmetic dentistry, allied to the growing number of market-savvy dentists who are not afraid to tell the public what they have to offer.

According to Dr Joe Oliver, of the Welbeck Clinic in Central London, the

What price the perfect smile?

reason why the British took so long to discover cosmetic dentistry was simply that few people knew what it could do. Most British dentists took the view that all that mattered was whether teeth were healthy; looking pretty was a question of luck.

What many people may not realise is how quickly teeth can be transformed. Take teeth-whitening. Most – but not quite all – teeth can be done. If they are darkish yellow because of too many antibiotics or are genetically dark they won't respond very well. If they are just a bit yellow through age, too much coffee or nicotine, though, they can be brightened up a lot.

I have had my teeth whitened three times. The first time was ten years ago at the very serious Clinique La Prairie in Switzerland. I remember being hugely excited when the dentist there suggested it (I was sampling the clinic's wonders for journalistic purposes) but to be truthful the reality was a bit of a let-down. There were no laser treatments on offer. I was given transparent resin gumshields, filled with lightening gel, which had to be worn nightly for three to four weeks. I forgot some nights, and the transformation was underwhelming.

These days there are laser-whitening techniques, which some gorgeous American dentists called Lowenberg & Lituchy (www.lowenbergandlituchy.com) performed on my teeth two and a half years ago. Gel was put on each tooth that shows when I smile, my mouth was propped open and, while I lay watching television, the laser went to work. Two hours later, my teeth did indeed look whiter. No tea, coffee or red wine were allowed for at least three days afterwards as the teeth are left rather porous. Resin moulds were made so that I could top up the treatment. For \$1,500 (£845) the transformation was there all right – but I have to say that the effect didn't last for long.

So to my latest treatment and a huge improvement in techniques. Dr Joe Oliver's "power whitening treatment" takes 90 minutes from start to finish and costs £695 (excluding the four-day home kit of resin moulds and whitening gel). The results are such that, for the first time, friends have noticed the improvement unprompted – not all of them, and not my myopic husband, but enough to make me realise that it really has made a difference.

I also opted for a set of resin moulds to allow me to renew the treatment from time to time. Again you are advised, as the American dentists put it, not to consume "anything that would stain a white blouse" for at least 24 hours, preferably longer. Dr Oliver says that the results of teeth-whitening are unpredictable: "It always makes a difference, but how much varies. It lasts for about 18 months – longer if people use the resin moulds from time to time."

The whitening doesn't damage the teeth but may leave some people with sensitivity. That will pass, though. Dr Oliver is not keen on home whitening kits, largely because the moulds are not custom-made for a particular set of teeth, so the gel doesn't hit all the right spots. Furthermore, he says, some gels can damage the teeth.

It need not end with whitening. Dr Oliver also offers what he calls the "smile lift", which takes three appointments spread over between seven and fourteen days and makes use of porcelain veneers. These are used to close gaps, straighten teeth, realign crowded or protruding teeth and, sometimes, to deal with staining. The veneers are handmade by an Italian technician, cost £545 each and last for up to 15 years, after which time they gradually lose their looks.

A complete makeover, including either crowns or veneers for the top and bottom teeth that show, can easily cost £9,000. Dr Oliver uses crowns (£650 each) when a tooth is in terrible shape – it is reduced to a stump, then fitted with a cap. Alternatively, for a single missing tooth an implant might be the answer. A metal root is inserted into the jaw, integrating with the bone, and a realistic ceramic "tooth" is built around it.

All in all, there is now no excuse for an unlovely smile – except, alas, a skinny wallet. And nobody should consider it mere vanity. An attractive smile is more essential for most people's confidence than clean nails or properly cut hair.

There is evidence that good teeth can also benefit a person's career prospects. A team of social psychologists at King's College London found that people with crowded or rotten teeth were less popular, less well-adjusted and were considered less clever than those with lovely smiles. So start saving – a lot can be done.



Before and after treatment: Kate Beckinsale in 1997 and pearly white this year.

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