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LOVE ADDICTION

the symptoms,  
the cure



# keep on smiling

At last – dentistry that's exciting. It may be expensive, but today's cosmetic techniques can make all the difference to how you feel.

By Lisa Armstrong

Three years ago, one of the American producers of *The Secret Garden* was in despair, not over the calibre of children's acting in this country – though God knows, that is enough to bring a lump to the throat – but over the quality of their teeth. "British teeth" has long been a description that is uttered with a shudder in the US. They can't believe the state of our ivories. They're aghast that we don't clamp every person under the age of 50 into a brace, complete with protruding metal prongs and rubber bands, because they unashamedly wear tram tracks all over their teeth at all ages – remember Cher on *Wogan*? They are disgusted by our lackadaisical attitudes to oral hygiene. They are puzzled by our *que sera sera* attitude to discoloration, unsightly fillings, crooked teeth and gingivitis (research shows that 80 to 85 per cent of adults in the UK suffer from some degree of gum disease).

There is undoubtedly a middle path between the Americans, who consider any imperfection or asymmetry in their physiognomies to be a gross physical defect, and the British, who regard it as "character" and let it all hang (and drop) out, but I confess that until recently I would have settled for the American way. But that's because when I was 10 I fell off my horse and chipped a front tooth and at that time it was exceedingly difficult to find anyone in this country who could do a good job in a case even as simple as that.

By the time I was 18, thanks to a bunch of inept British dentists, things had deteriorated calamitously. Two other teeth were hanging on by a thread. My father, ever the pragmatist, told me to have done with it and get dentures. Cue hysteria and tears from me. I learnt how to smile without opening my mouth. I was brilliant at communicating

from behind a hand. By the time I reached London at the age of 21 I wasn't just looking for a good dentist, I needed someone with a nice line in psychiatry.

Enter Mervyn Druian, a South African in Hampstead who for the past 12 years has been on a mission to improve British teeth, makes frequent trips to the US to keep up with developments and who every year brings over an American specialist to keep the rest of his practice up to date. He capped my teeth and built a bridge on the others that were beyond repair, let me cry on his shoulder and pay in (very) extended instalments.

This last factor was crucial. Dental treatment is frighteningly expensive: £300 for a crown (where the real tooth is filed down and a porcelain mould fitted over it) and about £1,200 for an implant (one of the newest techniques in which titanium posts

*The boundaries of what can be done to improve your teeth are pushed back each year*

are screwed into the gum which then grows around them so that there is no perceptible space between the gum and the new tooth). And because the materials eventually break down, and bones recede, cosmetic dentistry is, as the Americans say, "a lifetime commitment". In most cases cosmetic dentistry is not covered by private health schemes.

That's the bad news. The good news is that all these techniques are becoming increasingly widely available – and are getting better. As NHS funding is being withdrawn, more and more dentists are entering private practice and carrying out cosmetic dentistry because it is so lucrative. The boundaries of what can be done to improve your teeth are being pushed back each year.

Chipped and mildly crooked teeth can be contoured (by a drill) and polished; discoloration can be covered up with a process known as bonding (where they are veneered either with porcelain or a plastic composite); and small fillings can be carried out painlessly using lasers (good news for the estimated 14 million Brits who are scared of the dentist). Increasingly it is adults, rather than children, in this country, who are opting for braces – Amanda Wakeley, a designer whose business it is to look glamorous, shoemaker Patrick Cox and TV presenter Kate Ricketts among them. Even Cindy Crawford has one in the latest Pepsi commercial.

All in all, these days there is no reason – other than financial – for anyone to be embarrassed about smiling. Options, and practices willing to carry them out, are proliferating. Dentics, for instance, is a small chain of walk-in surgeries that look and operate like any other high-street shop. As Mervyn Druian says, "It's amazing who can afford the treatments these days. It's a question of how much you value your teeth." The most surprising people are going in for it. Kristin Mac Menamy, who has been winning plaudits for her transformation from grunge anti-hero to super couture mannequin, puts her recent feel-good factor down to her new teeth. Martin Amis, not someone who immediately springs to mind when you think of oral beauty, has reportedly spent between £13,000 and £20,000 on his teeth.

But once you have decided to go ahead how do you make your choice of dentist? After all, at the moment, any dentist can call himself a cosmetic dentist. Clearly not all of them will have the necessary artistic, or even technical skill to do what you want effectively. A fraction of a millimetre too long and a new veneer soon starts to chip on the lower teeth. Bonding that's too >22