

The crowning glory

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by Jacqueline Hayes

I have a fetish for oral hygiene, and it's got nothing to do with the idea that teeth are the new status symbol. My fetish was formed early in life but probably intensified when I was made aware, in my mid-30s, that my teeth were less than perfect. I'd never minded the Madonna-esque gap between my big teeth – I'd been told it was a sign of good luck. But the way my teeth were impacting on each other was apparently causing them to fracture. If I didn't do something about them soon, I risked losing them within a decade.

So I spent thousands of dollars for reasons of prevention, not because I wanted a Hollywood smile. But there are so many of those around these days. Have you noticed? It's becoming almost abnormal to see crooked, discoloured teeth.

Which brought to mind a boyfriend who believed good teeth were an indicator of where one sat on the social ladder. Great teeth, he said, demonstrated a more gentrified leaning somehow, an appreciation of what was proper, an ability to afford the best. Personally, I always believed genes had a lot to do with it, along with one's personal duty of care to maintain and prevent. I had another boyfriend who thought ironing shirts was character building. He didn't last long, either.

Yes, teeth are important. But the speed with which greater numbers have sought oral perfection suggests the focus on it has become an obsession.

In some cases, it can make or break a business relationship. One particularly successful British gentleman once said he believed that "rotten teeth and rotten breath mean the person is actually rotten, as is everything that comes out of his or her mouth". Nice.

The advent of video conferencing and social media sites that have trained the spotlight on the individual and their physical attributes – or perceived lack of them – has helped spawn not just an insatiable search for body and facial beauty, but the one thing that can outshine them all – the perfect smile.

"More general dentists are attempting to do more procedures that are outside of their comfort zone than they would have done five years ago when there was ample work for them to do in the area of general dentistry," Pajouhesh says.

Today, general dentists are performing the highest number of complex implant cases in Melbourne, work that really should be done by oral and maxillofacial surgeons, he says. The difference between the two is the extra dozen years of university training required for a dentist to become, first, a doctor then a specialist oral surgeon.

"Who would you want to be under the knife with the next time you need to have jaw surgery?" Pajouhesh asks.

Things need not get that dramatic if you can take advantage of the varied and less-invasive treatments and procedures that have become available in the past few years. Barely visible teeth aligners can straighten teeth without the need for braces within a year or two. (Cost: \$8500). Invisalign is now the most-searched dentistry product on Google and has teenagers to the middle aged lining up to straighten up.

Porcelain inlays or crowns that once took weeks to make can be placed in a day with Cerec (\$900 to \$1500 an inlay or onlay). And while veneers are now offered in fast and cheap snap-on varieties, if you want to avoid a bulky, bulbous and big-end result. \$1200 to \$2500 a unit will buy you 15 to 20 years of life. But, please do listen to your specialist when he or she advises against the fluoro-white finish you might fancy. There's a reason they make you sign a waiver saying you insisted on it.

Today, I've still got my teeth – the problem was nothing 18 months of braces couldn't fix.

I doubt if the improved look has had a material impact on my social standing, although I did, as my orthodontist promised would happen, meet a lovely man. So even though the gap in my teeth is gone, I'd say my luck has held.

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