

At the age of 13, awkward with a heightened awareness of my body and its numerous flaws, I was fitted for a brace. A cumbersome metal affair that moulded to the roof of my mouth with all the comfort of chewing on a geometry set. Two days after fitting, when a thug at school called me ugly, it was cast aside and I was castigated by my furious orthodontist. Precisely one month later I careered headlong into a fellow cyclist and landed on my front teeth, smashing and scraping them along the unforgiving tarmac. From that moment on, with two new veneers cemented to my battered front teeth, 1992 became known as the Year of the Dentist. And thus marked the beginning of my long-standing obsession with attaining the perfect smile.

Nine years on and it seems I am not alone. Those in pursuit of the perfect smile are now realising that sparkling pearlys take more than mere brushing, as NHS dentists have insisted over the years. Increasingly they turn to cosmetic dentistry in a bid to be free of the curse of our infamous British teeth (for so long the butt of jokes among our cousins Stateside).

The American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry estimates that procedures such as teeth whitening have increased 300% in the past five years, and for once, Britain is no exception. London-based dentist James Goolnik has been quick to pick up on the burgeoning trend of Brits adopting the American dentistry model, and admits that Hollywood has played a key role in the success of his business: "The media is full of images of celebrities with their perfectly straight white teeth, and people are becoming more and more aware of their mouths. As a result people come to us, instead of us having to say to patients

training for cosmetic dentistry in the form of a masters degree specialising in that field. You could do the basics but you certainly wouldn't have the aesthetic skills needed to do a good job on mending somebody's broken teeth."

Jennifer Golden, the Managing Director and joint mastermind behind Dentic's, the leading cosmetic dental studios in Britain, agrees: "The remit of the NHS is to produce functional, healthy dentistry and as far as they're concerned, if the teeth are healthy then they have done their job. To them, it doesn't really matter what they look like – for that you have to pay."

Undoubtedly the pioneers in changing the way the British think about their smiles, Dentic's now see thousands of patients in their three London branches every year, including "almost every British celebrity you see with great teeth". But the NHS is still a legitimate choice for those lacking in disposable income and it's not hard to see why – my four veneers with Dentic's set me back £1,600. The same treatment carried out on the NHS would cost £270, although Golden warns: "The most expensive may not necessarily be the best, but the cheapest will almost definitely be the worst."

Although for many the price of cosmetic dentistry is too high to justify, practices like Dentic's validate their cost by the sheer quality of care they offer. I was given a 40-minute initial consultation – an NHS consultation is a standard five minutes. With in-house technicians I was able to speak directly to the people who would be fixing my teeth, enabling them to judge my facial symmetry and adjust the line angles to suit the shape of my smile. The materials used for the veneers were of better quality and more aesthetically pleasing than their NHS counterparts

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"Did you know we could do something about this?"

Goolnik's Bow Lane Dental Surgery, in the heart of the City of London, recently became the first practice in the UK to use "Bright Smile" technology, only recently allowed into the country from America. Gone are the days of wearing cumbersome trays filled with bleach for days on end; for £550, patients can walk in, watch a DVD movie through state-of-the-art goggles and walk out an hour later with teeth that the surgery "absolutely guarantee you will be happy with". No quibbles there – after an intense session of peroxide gel bleaching that surprisingly proved to be both comfortable and, dare I say it fun, my teeth had noticeably rejected the stains that had built up through years of caffeine and red wine abuse.

But it's not only the bleaching that keeps dentists in drill bits. Veneers – coverings for your teeth shaped from porcelain – are the easiest way of permanently changing someone's smile. At a surgery such as Bow Lane the technicians work in-house, enabling a patient to have their veneers fitted about three days after the initial consultation. For NHS treatment the wait is usually closer to two weeks. It's an obvious advantage, when time and money issues dictate that the NHS dental patient can never experience the perks of the private system.

Whilst there is no argument that NHS dentists are indeed qualified enough to carry out "aesthetic" dentistry such as veneers, crowns, bridges etc, there is, as Goolnik points out, a world of difference between knowing it and doing it:

"After dental school you will need further

and my dentist Russell was clearly highly trained not only in the art of dentistry, but also in exemplary customer care – an area where drill-happy NHS dentists are often lacking. Underpinning all of this, however, it is the bare facts that really speak for themselves; the average general dental practitioner will see 1,508 patients a year – their private counterpart will see around 800.

Sitting in the chair looking back at my new reflection, it struck me that throughout our lives we have come to accept the brusque nature of NHS dentistry as a way of life, purely because we didn't realise there was an alternative. I had just experienced dentistry I never thought existed – an experience where care and quality took over from pain, tears and years of embarrassment due to NHS handiwork gone wrong. To many it may seem incredibly un-British to display such signs of vanity and financial frivolity. After all, I had undergone a course of treatment costing a total of £2,000 just to improve my appearance. And while it is true that cosmetic dentistry will not dramatically alter your life – I was no richer, no more popular nor prettier than when I had begun – it did make for a happier, more confident me. Two days after the work was finished, a complete stranger told me that I had a lovely smile. My usual reaction would be to whack him into submission, but this time I beamed back – I may have paid through the nose, but my mouth was thanking me for it.



All white now:
before and after



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