

Aspen Times

The Devil Tooth

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By: Paul Andersen

Roger Brown is an endodontist in Glenwood Springs, and he's my new hero. He cured my "devil tooth," and he did so with athletic and miraculous proficiency. Dr. Brown may have literally saved my life.

An abscessed tooth gets your attention faster than being whacked upside the head with a baseball bat, which is exactly how an abscessed tooth feels. It's one of the most unbearable, writhing pains you'll ever hate.

Pain is the body's way of telling the mind that something is wrong, and with dental pain the flashing message is acute and nagging. Dental pain reaches a high threshold in part because your teeth are only a few inches from your brain.

An abscessing tooth indicates a dying nerve that produces pressure inside the tooth. The usual remedy is drilling through the crown to open the canal and release the pressure. It sounds horrible, but it's a huge relief.

A "devil tooth" was so-called because ancient peoples thought the devil was living in the tooth of any poor unfortunate who had an abscess. Ancient skulls have revealed serious dental problems and the impacts literally of primitive dentistry.

Back in those dim ages, a medicine man addressed the pain-stricken victim with a sizable rock, which he smashed against the offending tooth. Ideally, the impact would knock out the offending tooth and relieve the pain and pressure.

This gave the medicine man high ranking in his tribe, unless the technique failed. In that ugly event, the medicine man might experience a reciprocal rock treatment to his frontal lobe, thereby ending his illustrious career.

Dr. Brown told me of ancient rock art depicting a man with his mouth wide open while another man positioned a rock at what anthropologists assume was a devil tooth. Such was the first dentistry manual illustrating a Stone Age extraction technique.

In a state of nature, my abscessed tooth would have been isolated over time by natural calcification and ejected like a splinter, or I would have perished from dental infection after first being driven mad by protracted and torturous pain.

By the time I slumped Neanderthal-like into Dr. Brown's office, I would have been amenable to the rock extraction technique ... or to any technique at all. The pain, which erupted like July Fourth fireworks, would have made dynamite a welcome relief.

Today, treatment for a devil tooth is high-tech. It involves needles, anesthesia, drills, wire files, antibiotics

and hot liquid rubber. The treatment is fast and the pain is minimized. For me, the relief was so incredibly welcome that I hereby bestow upon Dr. Brown full "Medicine Man" credentials.

I may be a Luddite in many ways, but I am deeply grateful to the advanced medical sciences that provide respite from physical suffering. Unfortunately, not all Americans can afford dentistry today because of a medieval health care system that often exploits patients rather than soothing their pains and illnesses.

Few Americans have adequate dental insurance to pay for the expensive treatments that can cure a devil tooth and other dental maladies, so a lot of people end up with gaps in their mouths where problem teeth have been yanked. The worse the economy, the more missing teeth.

Rather than issuing economic stimulus checks to boost the economy through the short-term gratification of consumerism, a national health care plan should be launched to cover medical and dental needs before they become acute.

One day, perhaps, modern health care will be universally available in this country for the benefit of all citizens. Otherwise, the Stone Age technique described by a cave painting may once again become the home remedy for a devil tooth.

Paul Andersen's column appears on Mondays in The Aspen Times.