

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Never fear: It's just root canal

Endodontists celebrating Awareness Week want you to, too.

April 2, 2007

By: Marie McCullough

This is Root Canal Awareness Week - aimed, according to the American Association of Endodontists, at dispelling that "common and foolish" myth that a root canal is painful.

The inaugural awareness week began on April 1, but this is no joke. It's part of the endodontists' broader campaign to educate the public about the treatment they specialize in. If it boosts their business (dentists now perform 75 percent of the 16 million root canals a year), that's OK, too.

"Everything is a marketing campaign," concedes association vice president Louis Rossman, a Philly endodontist.

So here's what you should be aware of: A nerve, called the pulp, runs like a string through a channel, or root canal, inside the tooth. A growing tooth needs its nerve, but a mature tooth doesn't. If this nerve gets infected or inflamed, it can cause excruciating pain.

A root canal involves several visits to remove the nerve, fill and seal the canal, and top the tooth with a crown or other restoration.

This is all done under local anesthesia and, while unpleasant (what tooth treatment isn't?), it is not painful.

After the numbness wears off, however, keep an analgesic handy. "There may be a little bit of soreness," Rossman says.

His association says "the key to ensuring a positive experience is choosing the right professional," noting that an endodontist (Greek for "inside tooth") has more training and performs many more root canals each week than a dentist.

Center City dentist Alan Halpern, who does lots of root canals, points out another key: Don't ignore a tooth problem.

"The patients who come in on fire and it's been brewing for a while - the hand of God could not render them pain-free afterward," he says.

- Marie McCullough