

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

To tell the tooth

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By: Peter Leo

'I'd rather have a root canal than ...'

Let's party like it's Root Canal Awareness Week! Which it just happens to be, and our apologies for letting this slide until mid-week. This is the first Root Canal Awareness Week in recorded history, and it's being celebrated by the lamp shade-wearers at the American Association of Endodontists, the dentists who are the root canal specialists.

Naturally, the point is to sell us on the ease and benefits of a root canal, as opposed to having a "root canal blowout at knockdown prices." I needn't tell you it's a tough sell. The root canal has an atrocious reputation, not only in dentistry but in life, with the phrase "I'd rather have a root canal than ..." so much a part of the language that it has achieved cliché status.



Stacy Innerst, Post-Gazette

Baby boomers, take note

For people of a certain age, cavities were a childhood staple that turned the dentist into an unpopular figure in American life and the butt of jokes. Then along came fluoridated water and improved dental hygiene. Today, more than half of all children reach age 10 without having any cavities, and a third of 18-year-olds are cavity-free, The New York Times has reported. But while dentists may be victims of their own success, these appear to be boom times for endodontists, in the form of baby boomers. Their mouths are filled with silver amalgams from the 1960s and 1970s as opposed to today's composite fillings. Those silver amalgam fillings are now cracking and damaging molars, which can lead to the dreaded root canal.

It's not that bad really

An AAE survey found that while the root canal suffers from an image problem, those who actually had one were six times more likely to describe it as painless -- not counting the cost, which is often in four-figures. The AAE says a root canal is no more uncomfortable than getting a filling. And, in fact, most people say that's true.

So what accounts for the dread? Some people have lots of pain caused by the condition the root canal is going to relieve, and it gets mixed up with the comparatively mild discomfort of the procedure. Also, the root canal was, in fact, much more difficult, painful and complicated than it is now.

Teeth are tough

The millimeter or so of enamel that makes up the outermost layer of a tooth is the hardest substance in the body, says The Times. As a result, an interred tooth can outlast the skeleton. The oldest things in the vertebrate fossil record are teeth. They go back 500 million years.

Open wide, Hollywood

Daniel S. Greenberg in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal:

"Pop culture isn't kind to dentists or dentistry. There are no dental heroes on television, a la the superdocs of the medical dramas or the legal whizzes of their courtroom counterparts. Dentists are usually stereotyped as socially awkward. Comedians keep alive the connection between pain and dentistry, though it long ago became painless. The lack of respect is unwarranted.

"In the USA, at least, dentistry is a trailblazing paragon of much that the medical profession claims to be striving for -- disease prevention, broad access, economy. In all these, dentistry has succeeded so well that it has become a shrinking profession, undermined by its own success at reducing the market for dentistry. There's much to be done, of course. But at the core of modern dentistry, there is a triumph that has gone largely unnoticed. Dentistry has minimized the need for dentistry.

"Hollywood, are you listening?"