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Teeth While U Wait

Chances are you will lose a few teeth. A new but pricey procedure replaces them without the suffering | By Evan Hessel

AMERICANS LOSE, ON AVERAGE, 12 teeth by age 50, mostly from gum disease or bacterial decay. Live another 15 years and there is a 30% likelihood you will have no teeth at all, according to a study by the U.S. Surgeon General.

As frightening as those statistics are, the standards of care for tooth replacement are equally horrifying. Dentists typically replace a single tooth by grinding down the abutting two teeth and attaching a bridge. Bridges typically last five to ten years, so a younger patient may go through several in his lifetime, at \$800 to \$1,400 per tooth. For those missing whole rows of teeth, the standard of care is a drool-inducing removable denture. A bit closer to the real thing are dental implants, fake-tooth-tipped titanium screws drilled into the jawbone, but these require two to three painful surgeries and months of healing time.

Now a number of dental technology outfits are improving on these procedures, sparing patients pain and dysfunction. Chief among them is Swedish dental implant maker Nobel Biocare, which received Food & Drug Administration approval last May for Teeth in an Hour, a quick, minimally invasive procedure for replacing several to all of a patient's teeth.

It works like this: Dentists take a computerized tomography scan of a patient's mouth (CT scanners are becoming common in dental suites) and analyze the jawbone, using software developed by

Nobel. Nobel's Swiss factory uses these plans to make a stencil-like mouthpiece, predrilled with tiny holes to guide the dentist through the surgery. Once the patient is in the chair, the doctor can affix a set of new chompers in about an hour.

Frank Letcher had been wearing a removable denture in place of his upper teeth for a year when his doctor suggested he try the Nobel procedure. "I couldn't talk without mumbling because of the thing," recalls Letcher, a 56-year-old high

school baseball coach in Los Angeles. So he reported to his dentist's office for a series of CT scans. When Letcher returned one month later, an oral surgeon numbed him, slid the surgical guide onto his gums and punched six 4-millimeter holes. He then screwed in titanium implants and affixed to them a permanent denture of perfect acrylic teeth, also manufactured by Nobel. The entire process took 45 minutes.

Though originally designed for entirely toothless patients, Teeth in an Hour is also approved for those needing to replace individual teeth. (In those cases a ceramic crown is attached directly to the titanium screw.) The only requirement for patients undergoing the procedure is sufficient bone density to withstand the drilling.

Currently there are 75 dentists in the U.S. performing Teeth in an Hour, though Nobel estimates it will train 400 this year at dental conferences and universities. Nobel is pitching the procedure to general dentists, in addition to specialists such as periodontists and prosthodontists, touting computer-guided surgery as a procedure that eliminates nearly all possibility of error. "With this technology anybody can do an implant," says Jonathan Ferencz, a prosthodontist and professor at New York University College of Dentistry, as well as a paid adviser to Nobel Biocare.

Teeth in an Hour's big problem is its cost: \$2,000 to \$3,000 per implant, or as much as \$60,000 for the entire mouth. (Letcher, the high school coach, got the guinea pig rate: He did not pay for his treatment.) Most insurance plans do not cover the entire cost of dental implants.

But, insists Nobel's chief executive, Heliane Canepa, "We are not nickel-and-diming with the price. This is what people want." Nobel grossed \$480 million last year, netting \$120 million. This year it expects revenue to surpass \$580 million and profits to hit \$195 million. **F**

