

DENTISTRY

The Root of the Problem

The apparent ease of tooth extraction, rather than upkeep of care, is leading to an unnecessary amount of people having their teeth removed. To tackle the problem, the Saving Teeth Awareness Campaign was launched in 2011. Now, **Dr Julian Webber, Co-Founder of the campaign, Principal of the Harley Street Centre for Endodontics, and former President of the British Endodontic Society**, talks to NIHR about the pressing need for dental professionals to alter patients' perception of root canal treatment.



Dentist Jamie Nelson with his patient, Chloe

The Saving Teeth Awareness Campaign was set up to make sure that when a tooth becomes problematic, patients understand that trying to save the tooth should be first choice.

Why should such a campaign be necessary? The answer can be found in the replies to a survey

of members carried out by the British Endodontic Society, with 97 per cent of the dentists in the survey saying that they had had experience of patients wanting the tooth extracted, rather than having it saved.

It appears that some patients think a replacement tooth is a

good solution. For a time, dental implants were promoted as an alternative to root canal treatment – patients were being told that a problematic tooth could be extracted and replaced with a dental implant which would never suffer from decay.

ROOT CANAL VERSUS IMPLANTS

But evidence is emerging that implants can be problematic. Just because a dental implant is an artificial tooth, doesn't mean it shouldn't be looked after. Arguably, it needs just as much – or even more – care than one of your natural teeth. Additionally, with the passing of time, a new condition called peri-implantitis has become a feature of dental implants in some patients; an

infection of the gum and bone around a dental implant which can mean the dental implant is lost and the patient is left in a worse position.

An implant is not a replacement tooth, it fills a gap left by a tooth which could not be saved by root canal treatment. This was well expressed in a guide for young dentists produced by the British Society of Periodontology and which I wholeheartedly endorse: An implant is not a substitute for a tooth, it's a substitute for NO tooth.

When we set up the Saving Teeth Awareness Campaign in 2011, we estimated that over a million teeth are removed in the UK each year – yet many of these extractions are unnecessary. In addition, we know that many

people in the UK are anxious about dental treatment and this could prevent them from seeking treatment.

One of our patients, Carrie, is a good example of someone who was nervous about treatment – she needed a root canal treatment in her front tooth. Carrie was interviewed in a video we made and explained that it was other people's reactions which contributed to her anxiety – but in the end it was all fine. She suffered no pain and the tooth was saved.

We wanted to change perceptions of root canal treatment. The Saving Teeth Awareness Campaign is about providing clear and professional information to patients who might be at risk of losing a tooth.

DISPELLING MYTHS

A key aim of the campaign is to dispel some of the myths around root canal treatment. For instance, root canal treatment need not be painful. This is despite an American catchphrase, 'I would rather have a root canal', suggesting this is the worst possible experience. But times have changed, and with modern pain relief, a root canal treatment need not hurt at all. In our clinic, it's been known for patients to fall asleep because they are so relaxed! The success rate is very high – around 95 per cent in the hands of a specialist – so the notion that



Dr Julian Webber

an implant is easier and simpler is misguided. And implants fail too. If you are going to have dental surgery and you have a tooth that has more life to give, then root canal treatment is definitely the way forward.

THE HEAVY METAL GENERATION

When you look at the history of the 20th Century, and the way that children born in the 1940s and 1950s were brought up, a campaign around saving teeth seems inevitable. In the post-war era, after a long period of deprivation, sweets and biscuits came back onto the market. And with mass production on the increase, sweet foods became cheaper and cheaper.

That led to a prevalence of dental decay and a 'drill and fill' policy to deal with all the holes in

teeth caused by frequent exposure to sugar. The problem with fillings, is that they don't last forever. At some point they will crack or chip, and once bacteria have penetrated the pulp of the tooth, the need for root canal treatment becomes pressing. People in their late 50s, 60s, and 70s are now known as the 'heavy metal' generation due to the high number of fillings in their teeth – usually molars.

In addition to the campaign, I have created the Young Dentist Endodontic Award. This is a competition to find the best case study of a tooth being saved by a young dentist. Over the years we have had some great entries. One of the cases that stands out is the entry in 2013 by young dentist, Jamie Nelson - pictured with his patient Chloe, aged 24. When Chloe first came to see him she had been told by her dentist that her

tooth needed to be extracted. She decided to get a second opinion and went to a new practice where she was given an appointment with Jamie.

Chloe is now Jamie's patient and very grateful she went for a second opinion.

She said, 'He was very supportive and took his time. I am very pleased and grateful to him. He saved my tooth – and saved me a lot of money too.'

Meanwhile, Jamie explained, 'What's exciting is how well the body can heal itself once infection is removed. I like the idea that there can be a big black hole where bone has been lost underneath the tooth and it can heal itself thanks to the treatment provided.'

Today the young have fluoride treatments and fissure sealants to protect their molars from decay and it's recommended that children use adult fluoride-containing toothpaste from an early age. It's likely that the need for root canal treatments will decline in the years to come. In the meantime, with the Saving Teeth Awareness Campaign, we are on a mission to keep as many teeth as possible and avoid unnecessary extractions.

For more information about the Saving Teeth Awareness Campaign, visit www.savingteeth.co.uk.

