

A Crowning Moment ... Not So Much



I was flat on my back. I mean, really flat, not leaned back — **flat**. Only a few minutes before I had been admiring the view out the window, a verdant arboretum complete with a burbling fountain and chirping birds with visitation rights. Periodontists need this sort of environment to compensate for spending 10 years on their education instead of being high school dropouts extorting \$40 million per year for making forgettable movies or hitting assorted balls with a variety of sticks.

Now, because I had been relieved of my glasses, the view was less distinct and definitely less soothing. Staring down at me right out of Central Casting, were three slightly out-of-focus figures garbed in the familiar accoutrements recognized by anybody who spends a lot of TV time absorbed in the drama of hospital operating rooms.

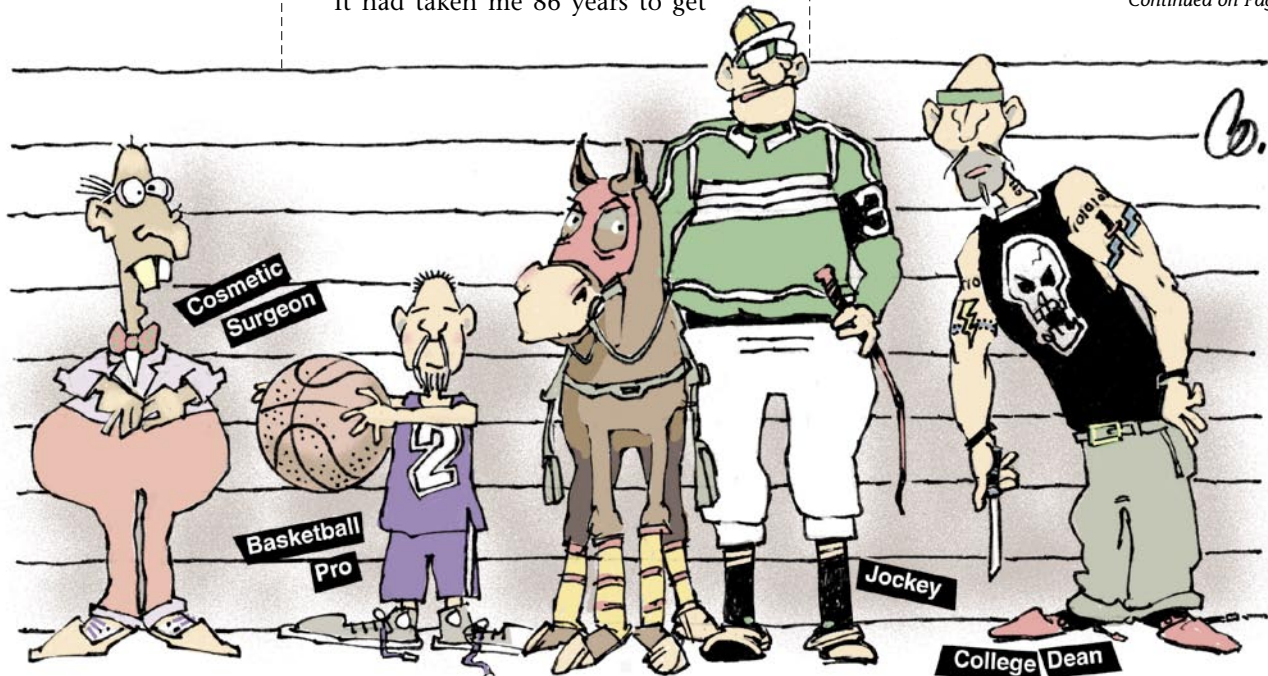
It had taken me 86 years to get

here. It was a destination delayed by an amalgamation of good genes, ignorance, and dumb fool luck. But now the jig was up. The failure of the root canal treatment as a result of a cracked root after 35 years rendered my upper-right second bicuspid hors de combat. After an initial period of resentment over the betrayal of a tooth upon which I had lavished so much care and money since my 11th year, resignation set in. Goodbye, O loyal and faithful servant; hello, **IMPLANT!**

There is an opinion shared by many patients that if a dentist is to be considered an authority on any given procedure, he should have undergone that procedure himself. A reasonable expectation, I suppose, but one that brain surgeons and I do not share.

That's why I no longer do full dentures. I never understood how anybody could suc-

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A Gallery of Poor Representatives

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cessfully negotiate any meal that didn't consist solely of mashed potatoes, custard, and tofu while equipped with upper and lower dentures. Certainly not with mine. There is not enough Fixodent in the world to entice me to give up my natural teeth to become more simpatico with edentulous patients.

Just a relatively few years ago, a bridge would have been my choice. Anybody can have a bridge if a couple of stable abutments are present and they don't mind the necessary reduction for the abutment crowns. Early implants were a pretty iffy proposition as researchers found their way through blades, screwed-in castings, vit-

reous carbon, and anything else that held promise. Happily, titanium won. Titanium sounds expensive, like platinum and uranium, therefore, superior with a certain cachet of snob appeal.

A relatively simple procedure, explained Dr. Tom Gaffaney, the perio guy down the hall who is doing the job. I'll be the judge of that. Even if my vision was obscured by green-clad elbows and latex gloves, there was nothing wrong with my ears. Drilling the hole for the titanium cylinder, although painless, sounded something akin to reducing ice cubes to crushed ice in a slow-speed blender. Bone is an excellent conductor of sound, especially when it has only four inches to travel from drill to ear.

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At that point, things became a little vague. But before I had completed counting the holes in the acoustical tile ceiling, binocular-eyed Gaffaney and his team of efficient assistants were giving me detailed instructions for postoperative care: Motrin, Perioguard, amoxicillin, and the office phone number. From the patient's viewpoint, it was almost a nonevent and, best of all, that stupid "no pain, no gain" mantra was not applicable.

"And I'll have my new crown in what, a couple of weeks?" I asked, knowing better.

"Try three months."

This is the only thing wrong with implants if you are a

go-go person who wants things done right now. You want your teeth whitened in one hour; lose 20 pounds over the weekend. Sorry, folks, but you can bet the periodontists would like nothing better than to make the whole deal a one-visit appointment. Then they could do implants for VIP movie people at about one mil a pop, and the eight-hour stint in the 9-by-10 operatory wouldn't look so bad.

A dentist with a missing bicuspid is a poor representative of the profession, like an ugly cosmetic surgeon or a really obese Jenny Craig rep. So, in the interim, if any of my people want to know firsthand about the joys of wearing a one-tooth flipper, they've come to the right place. I won't lie. ■■■