

Unearthing Dentistry's Origins

Dentistry's roots probed – Practice found to be at least 4,000 years older than first thought

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The Associated Press occasionally has a slow news day. This was one of them.

Inevitably the riveting revelations of celebrity affairs, pregnancies, marriages, infidelities, and divorces — in that order — are all duly recorded. Long-lost pets that find their way home eight months later after traveling 3,500 miles by foot or paw has proven popular, but none has topped the annual research that proves chocolate is good for you.

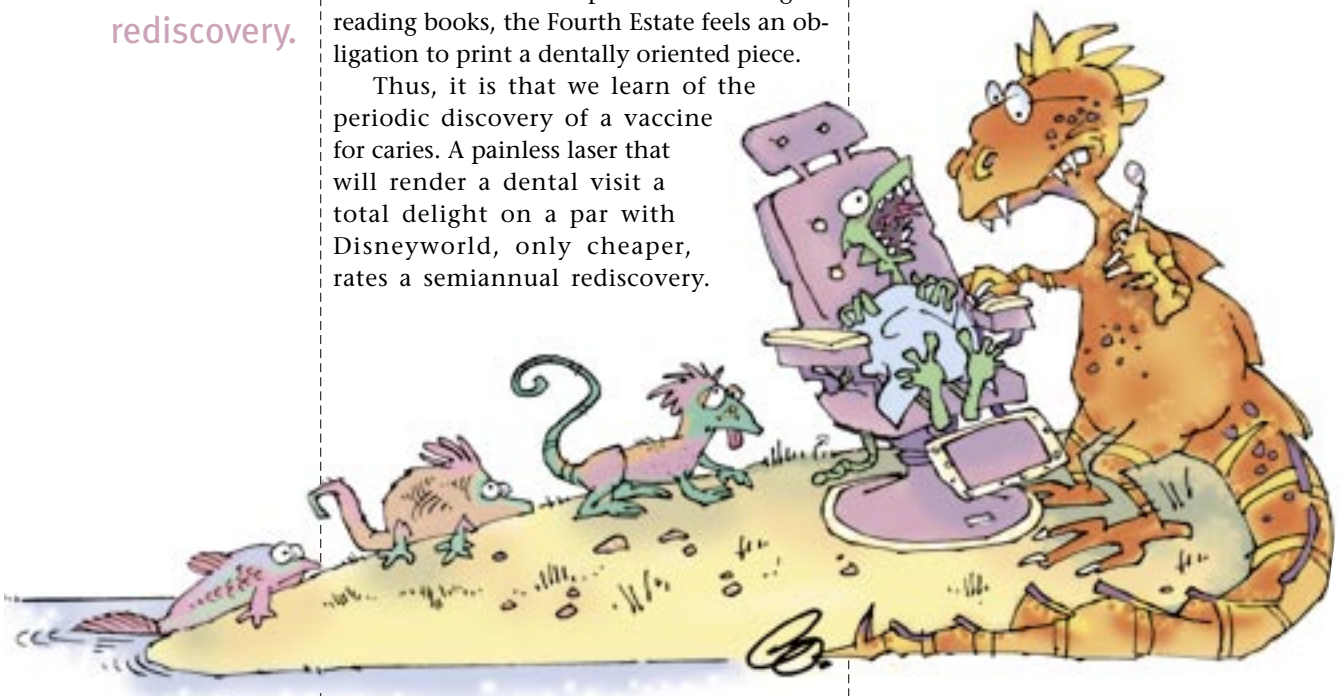
About twice a year, in an effort to keep its satiated readership from reverting to reading books, the Fourth Estate feels an obligation to print a dentally oriented piece.

Thus, it is that we learn of the periodic discovery of a vaccine for caries. A painless laser that will render a dental visit a total delight on a par with Disneyworld, only cheaper, rates a semiannual rediscovery.

The burden of the reporting falls on the staffer who has to come up with the headline journalistic tradition dictates must have one of the following terms in a 48-point font: painless, grindless, shotless, and, in the case of the above headline, roots.

The exact number of people outside the dental profession intrigued by ancient dental practices is unknown, but is estimated to be 11, give or take a couple. Until recently, the last recorded incident to capture the

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attention of the *AP*, *Reuters*, and yours truly, occurred some eight years ago when researchers digging about in a Gallo-Roman cemetery just south of Paris unearthed the earliest known dental implant. This was a wrought-iron tooth imbedded in the maxilla of a man who lived about 1,900 years ago. The iron tooth, as seen in X-rays, was said to have been a “perfect fit,” giving rise to speculation that a Gallic blacksmith must have been moonlighting as a dentist on the side.

The ancient Etruscans in northern Italy are reported to have made partial dentures, crowns, and simple bridges as early as 2,500 years ago. That these prostheses were so crude in their fabrication, a first-semester dental student of today responsible for a similar mishmash would be summarily stripped of his name tag and drummed out of the corps, is beside the point.

Currently, the *AP*, quoting the French journal *Nature*, has one-upped itself with the revelation that “primitive dentists drilled nearly perfect holes into live, but undoubtedly unhappy patients between 5500 B.C and 7000 B.C.” The evidence was found in a Pakistan graveyard where nine skulls with 11 holes were unearthed. According to Roberto Macchiarelli, an anthropology profes-

sor at the University of Poitiers, France, the drilling was done on “ordinary men and women.” Ordinary in terms of them screaming like banshees during the procedure, probably. The fact that thousands of Pakistanis later migrated to the United Kingdom, is coincidental.

Close examination of the prepared teeth indicates that no attempt was made to fill the holes with anything. Without a doubt, this was the work of a freshman Pakistani dental student who wouldn't get into Filling 101 until next semester. Richard Glenner, a Chicago dentist and author of dental history books, offered that the drilling could have been decorative or to release evil spirits. Evil spirits were right up there with tooth worms when it came to causing dental mischief years ago. “Why did they do it?” Glenner asked. “No one will ever know.”

Well, fine! If my analysis of media attention is correct, we can expect to read a dateline of Garden of Eden in about five years revealing how Adam's remains had been found and that dentistry done to close a diastema, probably at Eve's behest, was even older than we thought. He was also wearing a Mesopotamia Bridge, the precursor to the Maryland Bridge. Top that, Fox News! ■■■■

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