

Crow's Feet and White Teeth

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From the beginning of time until recently, the only middle-aged people with white teeth were wearing prosthetic replacements for their own naturally colored teeth. As they aged, their hair turned white and their teeth turned dark. It was the natural order of things to gradually exchange the bloom of youth for sags, wrinkles, crow's feet and wattles. Many people accepted this metamorphosis with grace and understanding, chuckling ruefully that although they were now in the "Golden Years," the whole phenomenon sucked.

In the entertainment industry, however, aging was simply not acceptable, and the money was there to thwart it. Movie stars in particular sought the services of teams of plastic surgeons and, inevitably, sympathetic dentists who could put the brightness of an 18-year-old's smile back into a 60-year-old face. Thus, we were treated to the startling and sometimes ludicrous look of actors who, distraught by baggy eyes and similar inroads of senility, insisted on rectifying Nature's perversity by displaying smiles frozen white in the dreadful *risus sardonicus*. Although the result shouted "phony" clear up to the last row in the balcony, the pursuit of youth was not to be denied. An exception was Walter Brennan, who won all sorts of awards with no teeth at all, but it was a sacrifice that never caught on with SAG members.

As with other trends innocent of logic, the Hollywood white smile caught on immediately, and soon dissatisfied shop girls, housewives and scullery maids began clamoring for whitened teeth. Obeying the basic canon of business, dental supply firms were quick to comply.

The whole advertising arm of dentistry concentrated on the transcendent importance of Everyman's right to really, really white teeth regardless of age, social status or access to a mirror. Dental manufacturers, who initially cultivated a hooded, watchful gaze on "bleaching" as it came to be called, began turning out bleaching agents in a wild variety of strengths and viscosities.

Dentists, suspicious at first of whatever chemical reaction was taking place in their patients' mouths, ultimately reckoned this to be a singularly unexpected bonanza. As expected, insurance companies, with Olympian certainty, declared the process of whitening teeth to be a cosmetic procedure, another human fatuity, and therefore not a covered benefit.

No matter, the cost of tooth whitening -- when compared with a full-on face lift, nose job or breast augmentation -- was a sybaritic bargain hunter's delight. Teenagers, whose teeth were already whiter than any middle-aged person could hope to achieve, were clangorous in their demand to get in on the process.

Inevitably, companies with no background in dentistry streamed like pilgrims to the Kaaba in Mecca in their haste to get in on a good thing. Over-the-counter tooth whitening kits

proliferated, featuring bleaching trays suitable for going 15 rounds with Lennox. The dental profession righteously excoriated this transparent attempt to lure away their clientele with a potentially hazardous treatment and dubious results.

About the same time, the American public's penchant for wanting things done NOW began to be heard. The usual bleaching process had been taking up to a week or more of wearing the bleaching tray for eight hours at night or at periodic intervals during the day for extended periods. Nobody, even the attending dentist, seemed to know exactly when the procedure was finished. If teeth got several shades lighter after five nights, patients wondered, would they get 20 shades whiter if the time were extended for two weeks? Or a month? Who knew? Nobody was prepared to define exactly what constituted a shade change, but the numbers were impressive regardless. Impatient patients bleated, "Why can't we do this faster, Doc, we got other fish to fry."

Not a problem for our compassionate researchers. We will sell the profession a high-powered light suitable for illuminating the Coliseum, they enthused. Couple that with a bleach strong enough to whiten the Black Hills of South Dakota and promise the public that their teeth will lighten at least 12 shades (company definition) in one hour. YES! *One hour!*

So that's where we are today. Some of us are still futzing along with a week or two goal and 15% carbamide peroxide, some of us with healthier bank accounts are toasting teeth with major arc lights and 30%+ chemicals. The public, tilting at Mother Nature's windmill, is still pursuing the chimera of the perfect smile. Wouldn't you like to run this by Drs. Fouchard and Black?



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