

LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING DENTAL TREATMENTS

Note: Information and opinion given here are provided in good faith for educational purposes only. For a professional diagnosis and recommended treatment, please consult a qualified dental surgeon.

Article by: ¹Dr. Joon Muthamah

Appreciation: Thank you to ²Dr Sandra @ Ryzall Abdullah for the images used in this article.

INTRODUCTION

There goes a saying that politicians hate dentists because they will have to keep their mouth open and don't talk.

An Egyptian scribe named Hesy-Re who died in 2600 BC is often referred to as the first "dentist." After almost 46 centuries, the phobia (or hatred?) towards dental treatments is still very fresh amongst the general public.

Maybe this is because it is very clear that even a mummy normally has its teeth intact and what's so great about visiting a dentist to keep your teeth huh? Egyptian kings never used floss too?

Remember, Egyptian kings never used to eat like us too. Today our diet, general lifestyle and environment have changed tremendously. We need a conscious effort to keep our teeth for life to enjoy the *kerepek* and *keropak*.

Before we talk about the phobia of visiting a dentist, let us ask – do we really understand what a dental check-up can reveal? And do we know what can be done to prevent the loss of a valuable tooth?

Are we taking an informed decision or a panic-stricken decision on our dental treatment?

This article seeks to reassure readers of the importance of good preventive habits and the options available to keep their teeth for life. We hope that through this article readers will understand dental treatments and their relevance towards making an informed decision.

STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION, GETTING THE RIGHT ANSWERS AND 'REPAIRING' YOUR BAD TEETH

Step 1: Check, ask & understand

Understand that check-ups are non-intrusive with no pain. Tell your dentist that you need a check-up and a feedback on the status of your oral health ... and that's it for today!

You don't have to reach a dental chair with a definite need to do a treatment. You can choose to find out and leave; to mentally digest the diagnosis.

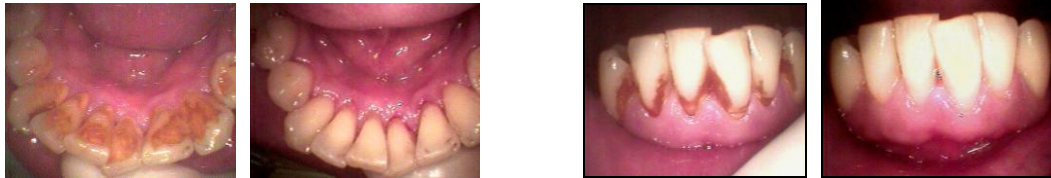
Also understand that you have every right to seek a check-up, get an opinion, **get a second opinion** if necessary and then make an informed decision before you do anything with your teeth or gums.

Step 2: Scaling & polishing

If you have not heard the word "dentist" since Primary 6; you still think dental chairs look like barber chairs and you are crossing 38, you would probably require scaling and polishing. Ask how much it would cost and what you expect to achieve.

"Why polish my teeth? ... No need for shining teeth *lah!*" ... You are right; polishing removes stains, improves the feel of your breath and makes you smile better. And if you are a lion trainer who needs to spot a seasoned look with obvious stains, then you may not need polishing!

"Scaling? You mean our teeth got scales one *ah?*" Well no – your teeth would have built-up calculus that is the perfect foundation for bacterial colonies to build squatter homes! You have the choice to provide them with 'Temporary Occupancy Licenses' until your teeth give way or remove the calculus and deny the bacteria a chance to eat into your teeth.



Polishing

Scaling

See ... with just 30 minutes of time you could take the first step towards knowing how is your oral hygiene, remove calculus and polish your teeth. You can now arrive in style with a better smile.

Now what happens if your dentist said that you have a chipped cavity on the front tooth that does not look cute at 38?

Step 3: Tooth-coloured filling

"What can I do" ... Options? You can do a filling using tooth-colored composite material. And you thought composites were used only in construction? Your dentist can prepare the tooth and fill the cavity.



... Isn't it cute now?

Tooth-colored filling can be done using several materials ranging from composite resin to glass ionomer.

But then what if the tooth is so badly broken and looks like a weathered lighthouse?

Step 4: Crown

If the roots of your teeth are healthy, not mobile and the tooth has some intact structure – we can re-establish the function by using a crown. It is like using a cap to hide balding hairline but with one difference; a crown sits firmly on the tooth and you could start biting almost like the original tooth.



Crowns would be made to match your tooth colour and is made of very durable material. You need not smile with a gold tooth shining in the morning sun!

"My tooth broke when my son hit me with the basketball. Now look like old volcano. Can do crown *meh?*" ... Now you need to plant a "bakau piling" before we pour the cement! This is called "post crown", where you plant a post and then place a crown on top of the tooth.

This comes after the root is treated accordingly i.e. root canal treatment – which we shall discuss later.



What can make a difference in price when making a crown? The main subject is the type of material eg. Acrylic, pure porcelain, porcelain bonded to metal (non-precious, semi-precious, precious metals) or full metal.

In a post crown, the material of the post can be stainless steel, gold-plated metal, titanium or carbon fiber.

Do ask about the pros & cons; durability, applicability to your case and of course, the price indication.

When all else fails, are there any last choices before abandoning the rescue mission? What if the tooth has infected root?

Step 5: Root canal treatment

Given the right 'environment', the dentist can attempt root canal treatment to restore an infected root to restore its function before doing a crown.

"If the tooth can *goyang* also can treat *ah?*" ... If the tooth is too mobile, of course it has to be extracted and thrown away (Oopps!).

"Then what happens?" ... Then we can keep the tooth in a jar of oil or donate to a university for research!! Oh man! Then we have reached the last frontier ... lost tooth.

Now there are not many choices except to find a way to put in a artificial 'solution.'

Step 6: Bridge

If there are some adjacent good teeth available (like two banks of a river!) then we can build a bridge in between. If the contractor is good and the concrete is strong, a bridge can last very long ... same principle here – if the adjacent teeth are not mobile, they can form a good anchor for the bridge.

With the two anchors, we can restore the few lost teeth in between. And you know what? This gives you a very natural look, natural bite and original feeling!

"Like this sure expensive one!" ... Well depends on what is meant as expensive. After messing with the teeth to the extent of losing it completely and then to put it back to almost it's original shape cannot be the price of a Coke!



The usual material used for a bridge is porcelain fused to metal (non-precious, semi-precious or precious metal).

"Got any cheaper solution or not?" ... Oh yes! Cheapest is to live with it and count on the savings made on the food bill! Next is making a denture.

Step 7: Dentures

Just before we talk of dentures – there is one treatment called "implants." This is where artificial 'roots' are surgically planted and crowns built on top of it. This is a slightly more expensive treatment compared with dentures.

Partial dentures replace one or more missing teeth while full dentures are made when no teeth is present in the patient's mouth.



"But denture very *leceh lah!* Must open, soak and clean. Sometime break, very *susah!*" ... Naturally removable appliances will have to be 'maintained' properly since there are ample gaps and crevices where dirt and foodstuff can get trapped causing infection and decay on remaining teeth.

Dentures made with a chrome-cobalt base would be costlier than a plastic base. Again choice is based on preference, affordability and application.

WHY ARE PRICES SO DIFFERENT FROM CLINIC TO CLINIC?

Even *pisang goreng* can have a range of price from stall to stall. But the easy part is we can judge by taste.

Dental treatments have several factors that are relevant when considering price:

1. The type of materials used (affecting durability, aesthetics & application)
2. The quality of materials used (whether they are from tested & proven manufacturers)
3. The dentist (whether the dentist exercises skill in handling patient anxiety, pain, discomfort and takes an informed approach to the diagnosis & treatment)
4. The technology used in treatment (right equipments for the right job; proper sterilization, right choice of finishing tools)
5. The quality of examination and diagnosis (whether all factors have been fairly considered when making a diagnosis & recommendation)

Therefore, it is not easy to compare equally between two clinics. However, the onus is on the patient to ask for an explanation or consider a second opinion if in doubt.

DO SENIOR CITIZENS OR CHILDREN GET PREFERRED RATES?

There are no rules on this subject. Treatments costs are not related to body weight or age! So there would be a base cost to work from and there are clinics that offer special rates at their own discretion.

The golden rule is - ask.

As even machines are out on preventive maintenance programmes to prevent undue breakdown; so are our teeth. If you stick to a regular check-up habit; many problems would be detected early and can be addressed well before it hits the critical zone.

Dentists are just as human as any other professional and the "Code Professional Conduct" set by the Malaysian Dental Council governs their practice.

Do not wait until the pain is unbearable before seeking help. Get a professional opinion.

¹ Dr. Joon Muthamah R graduated with a Bachelor in Dental Surgery from the University of Malaya in 1991. She underwent further on-the-job training in the Specialist Dental Clinic within the Sultanah Aminah Hospital, Johore Bahru before being posted to the Tangkak Hospital as the Dental Surgeon-in-charge. After 6 years with the government she left to join the private practice. She worked in Kuantan and later in Cheras, before opening her own practice, **KLINIK PERGIGIAN JOON** at USJ Taipan, Subang Jaya (Tel.: **03-56363171**).

² Dr. Sandra @ Ryzall Abdullah graduated with a Bachelor in Dental Surgery from the University of Malaya in 1991. He joined a private practice in Port Klang as a Dental Surgeon and worked for more than 10 years before starting his own practice, **KLINIK PERGIGIAN PELABUHAN** at Port Klang.