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Permanent dentures now available in one hour

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So Raquel Gluck, now 69, chose to replace her bottom teeth with permanent dentures in 1999. The process involved several operations over nine months, but Gluck, who had continued to use removable dentures for her top set of teeth, said she was happy with the results.

Still, when the Santa Ana, Calif., dentist told her about an experimental technology that could replace her upper teeth in a less-painful, one-hour operation, she decided she could be even happier.

And she was.

"The first (surgery) wasn't bad, but the last one was even better. It was one, two, three," said Gluck, who blames genetics for her bad teeth. "I am very pleased with the way it turned out."

Patients across the country will soon be eligible for the same quick smile. The procedure, dubbed "Teeth in an Hour," had been experimental when Gluck underwent it in 2003, but at a dental conference in Las Vegas this month, the approach will launch nationwide.

About 31.5 million Americans are missing some or all of their teeth, but removable dentures that were good enough for grandma are not appealing to aging Baby Boomers.

Although fewer people are losing their teeth as they age, the number of surgically placed dental implants increased 49 percent between 1995 and '99, according to the American Dental Association – a trend that reflects the growing value of a pretty smile.

THE DESIRE TO LOOK GOOD had driven the success of other procedures such as bonding, veneers, crown lengthening and whitening, said Dr. Paul C. Belvedere, a Minnesota dentist who has been teaching cosmetic dentistry for 25 years.

"When tooth-whitening hit the field in the '80s, there were many who scoffed at it. But now you can't go through a drugstore without seeing a million kinds of bleaching agents," Belvedere said.

Kevin Mosher, vice president and general manager of Nobel Biocare's North American headquarters in Yorba Linda, Calif., which makes the Teeth in an Hour implants, said beauty isn't always enough. Dentistry is also moving toward fast results with minimal discomfort.

"Ideally, if you can give back what God gave them, that's what people want," he said. "Patients want teeth now. Everyone wants immediate gratification."

The Swiss company conducted international trials for three years before getting FDA approval to offer Teeth in an Hour. About 70 dentists worldwide have performed the surgery.

THE "HOUR" in Teeth in an Hour refers to the length of the actual surgery to install the implants. But about three-weeks' worth of work go into evaluating the patient's mouth, planning the surgery and creating the prosthetic pearly whites.

Patients don't see the behind-the-scenes work that goes into making the implants, but they notice a marked difference in how little time they have to spend in a dentist's chair, said Dr. Christopher Marchack, a prosthodontist who participated in the clinical trials.

In the new procedure, patients are typically seen for a CT scan, which is then used to create a 3-D digital image of their mouths. The image allows dentists to do a "virtual surgery," planning the placement of the implants in the mouth digitally, without having to cut open the gums.

When patients returns to the dentist three weeks later, their prostheses are waiting for them – and their dentists know what to expect.

Rather than putting the patient under general anesthesia and performing a gum flap surgery, the oral surgeon uses a local anesthesia and "punches" holes in the gum where the implants are to go.

"They have less swelling and less pain," Marchack said.

But, people who opt for these self-esteem boosters will have to hope the Tooth Fairy's budget has grown since they were kids: both regular and Teeth in an Hour implants can run as high as \$24,000.

Gluck says the price tag for new teeth is well worth it. "It betters yourself," she said. "It improves your outlook on life."