

The Root Canal of Your Dreams

With 'sleep dentistry,' the patient won't feel, or remember, a thing.

Just thinking about the dentist is enough to make Danna Schmidt hyperventilate. Thanks to a tiny jaw, an easily tripped gag reflex and an irrational fear of the drill, for most of her life Schmidt wasn't able to get dental work done without torment. Not even fluoride. Everything makes me gag, says the Calgary-raised Seattle resident: the suction, the gloves, the X-rays, the bill. When dentists managed to corral the tourism marketer and mother of two into a chair, Schmidt would become a wild-eyed, sweating, thrashing, choking patient-from-hell. She once bit her hygienist.

Finally, at 37, her dentist at Calgary's Crowfoot Dental Clinic recommended a solution: conscious sedation, also known by its marketing handle, sleep dentistry. One hour before her next scheduled appointment, Schmidt knocked back a tiny, blue pill. I wasn't completely zonked; I was coherent enough to move around, she says. But I don't remember the dental procedure. In fact, she barely remembers being there at all.

The technique that saved Schmidt fits with a broader revolution in dentistry that began in the '90s. Thanks partly to fluoride, North American teeth were healthier than ever before; dentists, racing to find new ways to draw patients, began offering virtual reality goggles, noise-masking earphones, lavender-infused hot towels and massaging chairs. But for dentophobes who, at the wail of a drill, quiver like a golden retriever at the vet, those techniques don't cut through a deep-seated fear. Their elixir is benzodiazepine. Increasingly, this last-generation class of anti-anxiety drugs - which includes Valium - is becoming the Dentist's Little Helper, coaxing skittish patients into the chair.

Patients who take the drugs are serene and sleepy, but can engage in conversation. I liken it to being drunk, says one Vancouver dental receptionist, whose clinic doles out free Ativan to patients who ask for it. One guy was like, H-i-i-i-i-i-i-i, she slurs, boozily. Another guy just couldn't stop smiling. The beauty? Those patients have little or no memory of even the most painful surgeries, she says - an amnesic effect that also blurs their sense of time, making five hours feel like 15 minutes.

The idea of using sedatives in dentistry is hardly new, says Dr. Alex Penner, deputy registrar with the College of Dental Surgeons of British Columbia, which, like every provincial licensing body in Canada, regulates training and certification for sedation dentistry. Dentists have used analgesics like nitrous oxide - a.k.a. laughing gas - for

years. But laughing gas was used for painful procedures, not routine cleanings. And though it's a great pain reliever, it doesn't mitigate anxiety - the relief that phobic patients seek. Dr. Alastair Nicoll, president of the B.C. Dental Association, who practises in Elkford, a one-dentist Kootenay town, pinpoints the rise of sedation dentistry to the recent rediscovery of triazolam, better known by its trade name, Halcion. The '60s-vintage sleep aid was banned in Britain in 1991 after reports of memory loss in insomniacs. In North America, however, dentists consider it an ideal sedative because it's cheap, fast-acting, and safe in small doses. Across the country, more and more dentists are offering sedation; it's become quite fashionable over the past five years, says Nicoll.

The Canadian Dental Association doesn't keep statistics on dental fear, but a 2005 University of Toronto study showed that 16 per cent of Canadians suffer from dental anxiety. Eight per cent reported fear so severe it prevented them from seeking treatment. The phobic reaction is essentially the fight-or-flight response, says Martha Capreol, a psychologist with B.C.'s North Shore Stress and Anxiety Clinic. Your heart beats faster, your blood pressure goes up, your hands and feet go cold and clammy, and you get dry mouth. Dental phobias, which Capreol says require eight to 12 sessions to kick, don't necessarily stem from past trauma. Just seeing a movie like the 1976 chiller *Marathon Man* - in which an ex-Nazi dento-sadist played by Sir Lawrence Olivier tortures Dustin Hoffman's character by drilling into his teeth without anaesthetic - is enough to trigger a fear of the chair, she says.

Sedation dentistry is drawing some criticism from health professionals who fear the potential for over-sedation and related complications. Any type of sedation involves risk. And Halcion has been proven to have a profound effect on memory function. Still, the gruff old days of drilling-and-filling are behind us. After all, for people like Schmidt, who gagged in conversation just recalling the scent of the latex gloves, the alternative is a mouth full of micro-cracks and a decaying smile.

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