



## THEN AND NOW

Michael Franco

# 28,000

Number of human teeth in a tower built by a dentist in Qingnan, China.



# Bite That

It has to be one of the most feared professions in the world - **but dentistry is also one of the oldest**

**Around 5000 BC, the Sumerians believed that** the tooth worm caused dental pain by boring into a tooth and wriggling around. Treatments included trying to burn it with a heated probe, or knocking off the crown and yanking out the nerve, which some believed *was* the worm.

When these delicate methods didn't work, people turned to magic, inhaling the fumes from poisonous henbane seeds in an attempt to smoke out the invader, or coating the teeth with honey. Ancient Egyptians believed in applying a dead mouse to the offending tooth. Other methods included wearing bones picked out of wolf excrement; rinsing teeth with tortoise blood, white wine or old urine; and rubbing gums with the ashes from burnt ox heels, goat's feet, rabbit and wolf heads.

For those seeking more practical treatments, drilling was an option, albeit a painful one. Skulls discovered in Pakistan show that dentists were drilling into the teeth of live patients as early as 7000-5500 BC. Anthropologists believe flint drills were used to make

holes in the teeth, a technique that may have evolved from ornamental bead drilling. The fact that some holes were found in hard-to-reach molars suggests the aim could have been to reduce the pain of cavities.

When all else failed, it was time to pull the tooth. In Europe, by the year 1200, extractions were usually performed by a barber, who would advertise his services by hanging the teeth he'd removed on his pole.

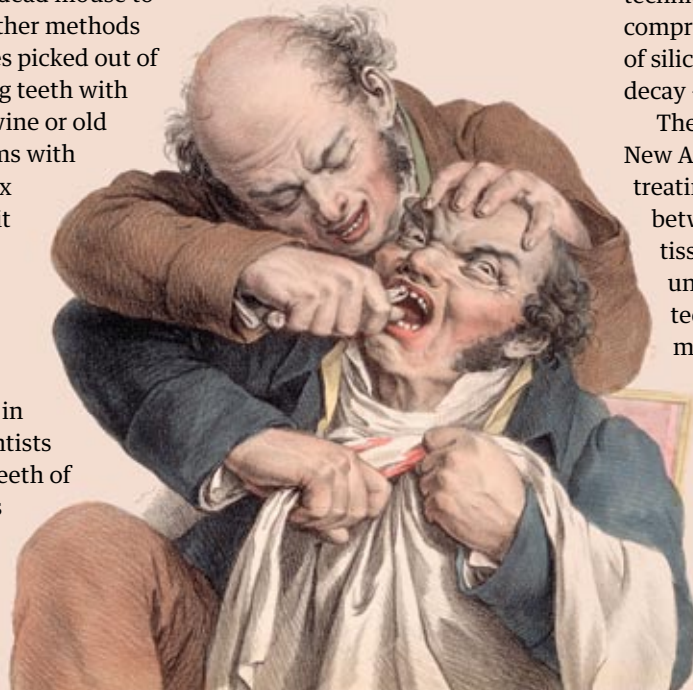
The lack of reliable anaesthetics and the brutal nature of treatment,

encouraged people throughout the ages to take good care of their teeth. The ancient Greeks had a toothpaste which combined pumice, talc, emery, ground alabaster, coral powder and iron rust. Fourth century Egyptians preferred a dental cream of rock salt, mint, grains of pepper and dried iris flowers.

Despite modern fluoride treatments and toothpastes, people today still have trouble with their teeth. But a trip to the dentist is no longer such a horrific experience. A new technique known as air abrasion uses compressed air to blast tiny particles of silica at cavities, removing the decay - and the need for drilling.

Then there's the Laser-Assisted New Attachment Procedure for treating gums. It distinguishes between normal and diseased tissue and only zaps away the unhealthy areas. And CAD/CAM technology allows dentists to make a 3D image of a tooth using laser imaging. The size of a pen, it eliminates the need to create impressions using mouth-filling putty.

One thing it won't find, however, is the evil tooth worm. That dental devil has been permanently eradicated. ■



## Treatment Timeline

**2700 BC**

Chinese use acupuncture to alleviate dental pain.

**166-201 AD**

The Etruscans experiment with dental prosthetics, including gold crowns and bridgework.

**1130-1163**

Catholic church bans monks from carrying out dental procedures.

**1790**

American Josiah Flagg creates the first true dental chair.

**1844**

Nitrous oxide is found to dull the pain of dental treatment.

**1890**

Tooth decay is identified as a microbial process, sparking interest in oral hygiene.

**1896**

Dr C. Edmund Kells takes the first dental x-ray.

**1938**

Nylon tooth-brushes go on sale. Animal hair was used previously.

**1950s**

The first fluoride toothpastes are manufactured.

PHOTOS: CORBIS