

ORTHODONTICS

You can reveal your perfect smile

It isn't just for children, and it doesn't just address skew or protruding teeth. Orthodontics can assist with problems such as grinding, drifting (through loss of permanent teeth), and crowding. It's also not solely about having a beautiful smile, and you can have it at any age, writes Mandy Collins

SO, YOUR parents couldn't afford braces for you when you were a kid and you're wondering whether it's too late? The answer is, it's not, and you're not alone in needing them. Dental specialists in SA report that more of their patients are adults and the number has been steadily increasing every year.

Johannesburg orthodontist Dr Mark Jackson says the trend of more adults seeking treatment is in line with the US, where about 20% to 25% of patients are adults.

"There are a number of reasons for this," he says. "Often, patients didn't want orthodontics as children, or their parents didn't think it necessary, or couldn't afford it. Now as adults, they are in a position to do something about it. This is coupled with dentists seeing that their patients have problems because their teeth are misaligned and are being damaged as a result.

"We also get a lot of referrals from periodontists (gum disease specialists) and prosthodontists (specialists of implant, aesthetic and reconstructive dentistry), who need us to do certain things before they can do their work."

Pretoria orthodontist Dr Colleen Forsberg says the perceptions and stigmas attached to wearing braces are changing as new technology and techniques evolve.

"Braces are not as unsightly in appearance as they were in years gone by. Smaller metal attachments and ceramic — or tooth-coloured aesthetic attachments, which are almost invisible in the mouth — are also available now. Self-ligating ceramic attachments have the added advantage that they don't need clear elastic ligatures, which tend to discolour if the patient smokes, drinks red wine or eats curry," Forsberg says.

And lingual orthodontic treatment — where the attachments are placed behind the teeth — is also a possibility."

Forsberg says the most common reason adult patients give for wanting orthodontics is that their parents couldn't afford the treatment when they were younger.

"Now that they are financially free adults, they have money to spend on aesthetics, health and wellness. The higher a person's socio-economic status the more they place emphasis on fashion, health, wellness and beauty," she says.

"In addition, many people realise that the benefits of a nice smile are social acceptance, improved confidence and positive self esteem."

People with skew or protruding teeth often don't want to smile or talk properly, or they hide when photographs are taken.

So the appearance of their mouths dictates their personalities and interaction

with others.

People are also often stereotyped, Forsberg says. Those with protruding canines are said to "look like Dracula", or they have "Bugs Bunny" protruding incisors. People with "weak" or "dumb" personalities are often portrayed as having "weak jaws".

"These patients are the ones who often have the internal motivation to break out of the mould, and the psychological benefits are immense," says Forsberg.

Jackson says orthodontics is both "art and science". There's an artistic component, because you want an aesthetic outcome, but it's also about making the teeth fit in the best possible way.

"It's like the gearbox in your car — when it all fits together properly, it lasts much longer. Your teeth are essentially a crushing machine. You have a top row of teeth, and a bottom row, and they need to mesh together to work properly," he says.

Orthodontics doesn't just address skew or protruding teeth, it can assist with problems such as grinding, drifting (through loss of permanent teeth), and crowding. It's also not solely about having a beautiful smile. Properly aligned teeth are less prone to decay, gum disease, bone loss, fracture and wear.

"Orthodontics has been around since the turn of the 20th Century, and its basic principle has remained the same. If you push on a tooth, it will move. The teeth are caught between two muscle systems: the tongue keeps them from moving too far back, and the lips keep them from moving too far for-

ward. But sometimes issues such as a lack of space in the mouth might cause them to shift out of place."

Both experts say that many people are unaware that teeth can be moved at any age. Jackson's oldest patient is 74.

Forsberg says treatment is sometimes technically more challenging for the orthodontist in older patients, but possible in the majority of cases.

There are also financial concerns. Some medical aids don't cover adult orthodontic treatment, and not everyone can afford to pay the bills themselves.

"Many people want to know if they can speak and sing properly with braces or play certain musical instruments like the flute," she says. "This is usually not a problem. Lingual orthodontics sometimes causes some people to lisp, but not necessarily so."

Adult patients are also concerned about the effect the sight of their braces may have on others, especially when they work with members of the public. Generally, though, comments are usually out of curiosity.

And then there's the issue of pain.

"There is some initial tension for the first few days," says Jackson, "but it's not painful." The teeth can be sensitive for the first week or two, but this can be controlled with mild analgesics.

Forsberg says at first eating might be difficult, but once the sensitivity subsides and the eating habits are changed, patients find they can easily adapt to any diet adjustments that need to be made. Most food can be eaten as long as it is cut finely.

Of course, you do have to do your bit, and clean both your teeth and the braces well.

"If the teeth are not cleaned properly they can get permanent stains, gum infections and cavities," says Forsberg.

However, she says most adults comply with oral hygiene instructions and are not at risk, and there are many oral hygiene aids available to keep everything squeaky clean.

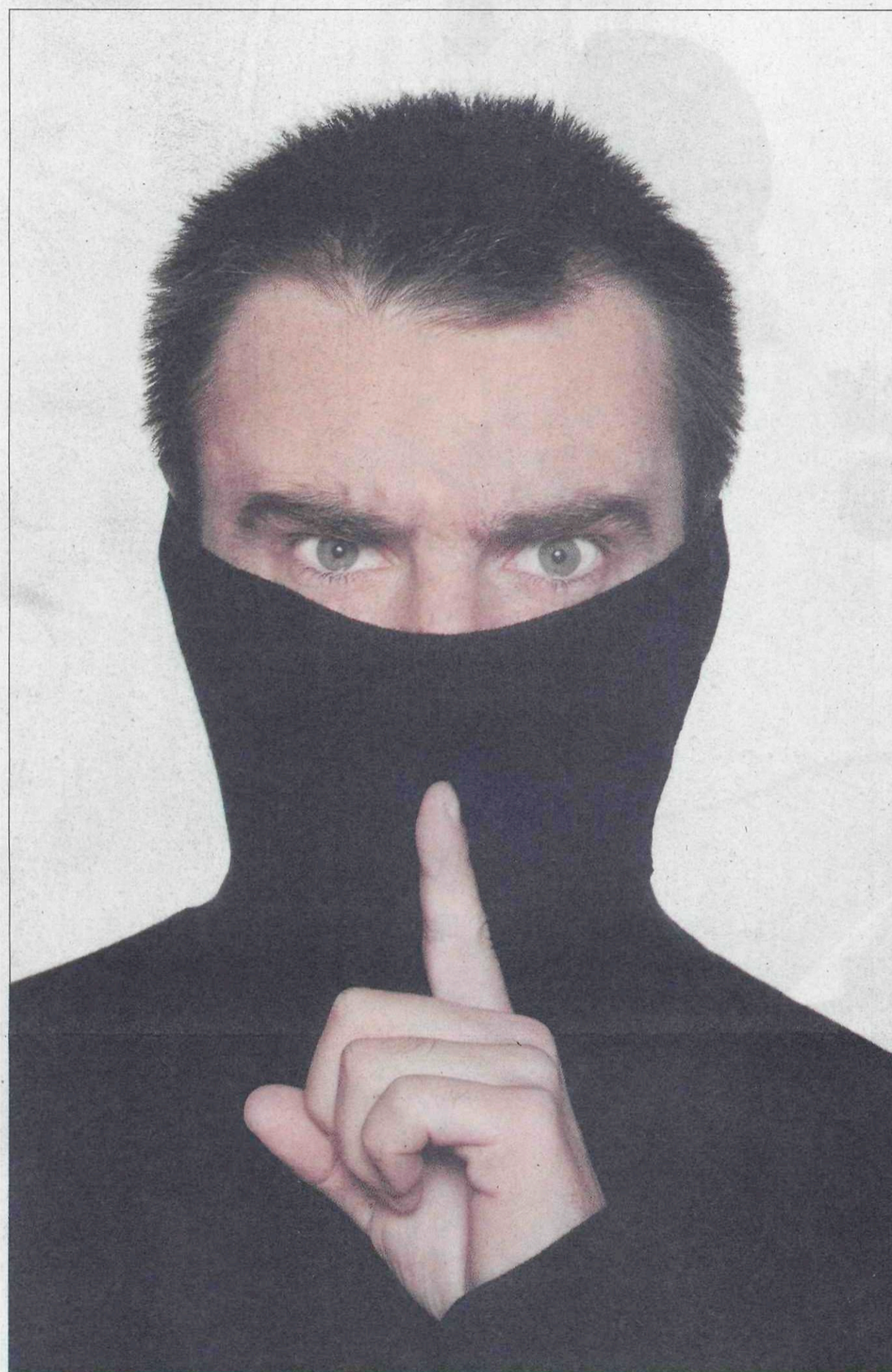
If there is a problem with jaw as well as tooth alignment, a combination of orthodontics and jaw surgery may be needed to achieve the desired result — a procedure known as orthognathic surgery. The key is to discuss all options with your orthodontist, and to have realistic expectations.

"Orthodontic treatment has limitations and some people's expectations might be out of reach," says Forsberg. "It's important for an orthodontist to assess the reasons and motivation of the patient seeking treatment."

The bottom line is that it's not too late.

"As long as you are around, and you have healthy teeth and healthy bone, you can have orthodontics," Forsberg says.

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TALKING POINT:
The benefits of a nice smile are social acceptance, improved confidence and positive self esteem, and it's never too late to get one, say orthodontists.
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