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'I went to Budapest in lockdown to fix my teeth – and saved £4,000'

Despite years of feeling unhappy with his smile, the cost of dental work in the UK left Anthony McGowan in a bind...

By Anthony McGowan
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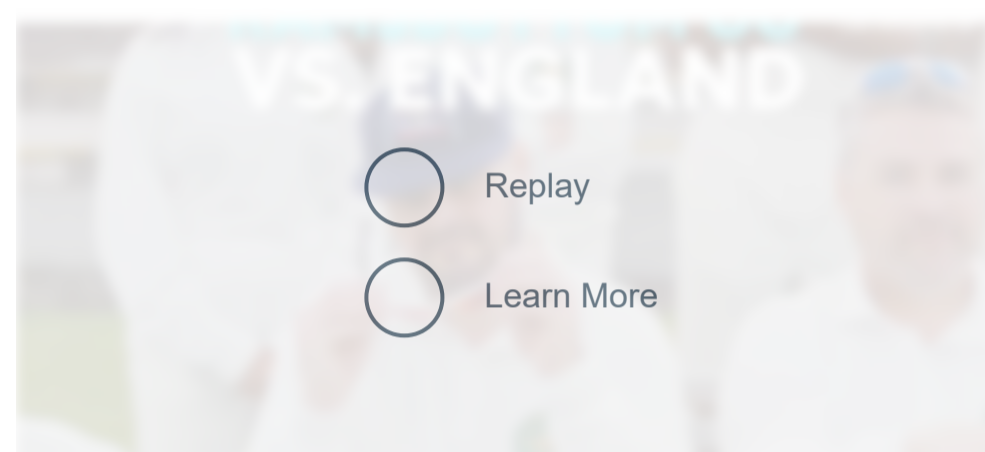
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I suppose we all went a little mad over the course of lockdown. It took various forms in my circle of friends: the fanatical jigsaw puzzler, the compulsive sourdough baker, the beard grower, the notorious dog hater who came home with a baffled dachspoodle.

My own lockdown neurosis took the form of a debilitating obsession with the state of my teeth. I have classic Seventies NHS dentition. The front ones are OK, even though you'd never see me flash my greyish smile and think: "California!" The problem is my back gnashers. Most of them were filled back in the Dark Ages of dentistry, using the traditional mixture of mercury and whatever other random poisons were going cheap at the time. Over the years, filled teeth weaken and crack, and such was the fate of mine.

There's something incredibly intimate about the teeth and mouth. They're both the inside and outside of you. You're never not aware of them. Talking, eating, breathing, kissing: the mouth is where the action is. I wonder sometimes if we're all either drawn to the eye or the mouth. Me, I'm a mouth person. I watch lips and teeth.

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So my own dental issues were deeply tragic. Each night of lockdown I'd find myself tonguing each tooth in turn, feeling for its vulnerabilities and frailties, like an otter in a rock pool hunting for crabs. The most acute problems were a missing molar at the top, just visible at the periphery of a smile, and a lower molar, with an old root canal that was patently on the verge of a mental and physical collapse.

My excellent London dentist suggested redoing the root canal at the bottom and an implant for the top. The cost was nudging £5,000 and there was a risk the root canal would fail. If I went for a more certain solution, extracting the bottom tooth and going for two implants, it would be closer to £7,000.

I seriously considered just living with it. True, I couldn't do much in the way of chewing, but there was always gruel. But the truth is my teeth were making me genuinely unhappy. And also, boring. I found myself bringing up my dental woes at every opportunity. I sensed people might be avoiding me, lest I go into another detailed description of my latest oral misadventure.

So I decided to bite the bullet. And the fact the implant surgeon used by my dentist came from Hungary got me thinking. And googling. It soon became clear I could cut the cost in half if I went abroad for the work.

The first and most important thing I found out was there's a strong correlation between the experience of the surgeon and the outcome. Surgeons who specialise in implants simply do better than general dentists who have a crack at them.

I found adverts for clinics everywhere from Croatia to Egypt. Many seemed excellent, with gleaming facilities and glowing online reviews. But it was obvious there was a cluster in Budapest. Several looked fine, but I could only find one that also had an outpost in the UK where an initial consultation could take place. And so I made an appointment with Smile Savers Implant Clinic in London.

The strange thing is, as soon as I'd made my decision, a good deal of my anxiety floated away. As I waited in the hi-tech Gray's Inn Road clinic, despite some mild apprehension, I felt a genuine lifting of my gloom. They took a panoramic x-ray of my whole jaw and a plan of action was established, which would cost just over £3,000.

First, the bottom tooth had to be pulled. This was probably the most upsetting part of the whole process. I loved that tooth – 45 years we'd been together. And then it was gone. Pulling a tooth is never not brutal, but you get over it. The extraction took place in the London clinic towards the end of last year, then three months of healing had to take place before my trip to Smile Savers Budapest for the main event.

Stage 1 is the actual implant part. The surgeon cuts into your gum, then a short titanium post is screwed into your jawbone, the gum is sewn up and off you go to wait six months for the post to become properly integrated into the bone. Stage 2 involves a titanium abutment being attached to the implant. Stage 3 is the final placement of the new tooth on the abutment. Stages 2 and 3 happen during a second, five-day visit.

Travelling to Hungary in the midst of the second lockdown was, to say the least, a performance. I had to get the right documentation from the clinic to prove I was going for legit medical reasons. I had to arrange a pre-flight Covid test, as well as booking the day two and day eight tests for my return. I also needed two more negative tests while I was in Hungary; one for the local authorities to release me from quarantine and one to show at the UK border.

Thankfully, the clinic arranged the paperwork and the Hungarian leg of the testing process. Without that, I don't think I could have made the trip.

Tests and paperwork sorted, I found myself on a Ryanair flight to Budapest, a new city to me. It was an odd time to be travelling, but also a wonderful one. There were no tourists at all in the city, and so I had its elegant streets and grand public buildings to myself, bar the Hungarians.

Smile Savers has a couple of stylish flats you can rent in the same building, and staying there was one of my smarter moves, taking much of the angst out of the stay. It was a five minute journey from the flat to the chair.



Dr Zolt Nemeth and Dr Attila Kalman were part of the team that looked after Anthony

The procedure itself took half an hour. Once again there was no pain, but a definite jolt when you realise they're drilling not into your tooth, but into your bone.

The implant was inserted by the head honcho, Dr Kalman, and around him was a deft and skilled team looking after all the peripheral aspects of the job, the anaesthetising, the stitching, the hand-patting.

I was given painkillers, antibiotics and stern instructions. No booze (tricky, in this city of wonderful cafes and bars) and no nose blowing. This latter was particularly difficult – I have hay fever – but it raises the pressure in the sinus, which could end up displacing all that carefully grafted cow bone.

I can't say I'm actively looking forward to the final stage, which should take place in December – after all, they'll be slicing open my gums again – but nor am I dreading it.

Would I recommend dental implants? Certainly, because I feel that I'll be able to get on with worrying about all the usual things – love, life, work – rather than obsessing over my poor teeth.