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Beauty is tooth, tooth beauty

To form a more perfect smile, dental clients are putting a whole lot of money where their mouths are.

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In the age of Zooms and BriteSmiles, veneers and Invisalign, Laura Ahtes could be the queen of extreme tooth care.

She avoids "biting" into food with her bonded front teeth; eschews tea, coffee and colas; uses Crest Whitestrips once a month, and brushes twice in the morning and twice at night - with two brushes and a blend of three different toothpastes. She recently upped her dentist visits from two to four times a year.

"Going to the dentist is like going to my hairdresser. I spend as much time on my teeth as I do my hair and make-up," says Ahtes, Mrs. Delaware 1994, who estimates she spent "easily" more than \$10,000 on her pageant-ready smile.

"Most people know their hair color," she adds. "I know my bonding color - it's A2." Ahtes, 41, a Wilmington paralegal, may seem obsessive about her pearly whites, but she is part of the wave of Americans who hop into their dentist's chair for way more than health reasons, spending from about \$400 for basic whitening to several thousand dollars for veneers and more involved cosmetic procedures.

According to the Academy of General Dentistry, a trade and education organization, cosmetic dentistry contributed about \$15 billion to the \$70 billion U.S. dental industry in 2003.

Increasingly, dentists are advertising cosmetic specials, often for occasions such as proms and weddings (yellow doesn't go well with white). And dental spas, where you can see the orthodontist or get your teeth whitened before a facial and a massage, are popping up in some cities.

At Smile Health Spa in New York, for example, before (or after) you open up for dentist Irene Grafman, you can get a Vitamin C peel, a lip or eye rejuvenation, and paraffin treatments for hands and feet.

Joseph Roberts, a Rittenhouse Square dentist in business for two decades, says his own patients, mostly those who come in for cosmetic procedures, are making more beauty inquiries.

"I've had people whiten their teeth and asked about where to go to color their gray. They have

asked about referrals for Botox," he says.

According to a 2004 survey conducted by the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD), an industry advocacy group, aesthetic services in dental offices grew an average of 12.5 percent in the previous five years.

Some dentists, the study indicated, saw that part of their practices increasing by as much as 40 percent, with tooth whitening being the most-requested service. Tooth whitening and bleaching has increased by 300 percent over the last five years, the survey also notes.

For Ahtes, it was entering pageants since age 13 that put her on the path to pursuing a perfect smile. For many others, it's wanting the smiles movie stars and TV anchors wear - and knowing similar ones can be bought.

On television shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, participants get everything done - and their smile is one of the first things changed. Jagged or discolored teeth become polished and perfected.

"People are more aware now of all the technological advances and are asking for things to help them look better," Roberts explains. "Before . . . you went to the dentist to fix or prevent problems. Now adults want youthful smiles and white teeth."

Despite the tremendous growth in the quest-for-perfect-teeth industry, dental professionals say health care and prevention, not image makeovers, remain the foundations of dentistry.

"I don't think there's a conscious shift" among practitioners to concentrate more on cosmetic procedures, says dentist Scott S. DeRossi, the assistant dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine.

While dentists may be making cosmetic suggestions, savvy patients are driving most of the demand.

"People are saying, 'Now that my teeth are healthy, I'd also like them to look better,' " says Center City dentist Barry Dubin.

Sometimes, Dubin says, he has to coax patients eager for instant straight whites to go with invisible braces and whitening over quicker fixes such as veneers.

A significant number of the people requesting cosmetic dentistry are baby boomers, who are turning 60 with strength and vigor, and money in the bank.

"You have one of the largest population bubbles we have ever seen coming of age at the same time and they have the discretionary income," says Marty Zase, a Colchester, Conn., dentist who is president of the AACD. "They're working out, they're dieting, and they want a great smile." Says Penn's DeRossi: "Now, instead of making complete dentures and removable plates, we have patients who are managing their dentitions longer, later, and asking for braces at age 50." Among patients 50 and over, the AACD says, most get crowns and bridges, but whitening comes next in popularity, followed by veneers.

Some people, however, become obsessed with cosmetic dentistry, particularly whitening. As a result, their teeth can become translucent and seem almost blue.

"These people are hyper-focused on their teeth," says Matthew Messina, a dentist and spokesman

for the American Dental Association. "It becomes more of an image issue than a dental issue. It's like anorexics - we think they are starving to death, but in their eyes they are fat."

Choosing the whitest white available is also a hazard, especially for older people. "It screams 'fake'," says Roberts. "Especially if you're over 50 and have these toilet-bowl-white teeth."

After retiring from a New Jersey state job five years ago, Charles Tarr, 63, pondered a mouth update. This summer he left the job to Dubin.

He smiles often to show the results: 40-year-old fillings and some worn teeth replaced by new crowns and teeth that gleam.

"Friends have come up and noticed the improvement instantly. Some people say they know there's something has changed but they can't immediately tell what," says Tarr, who lives in Center City and New Hope and now does volunteer work. "It's well worth it."

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Bright Whites

Cosmetic dentistry continues to grow in popularity. Here are some common procedures:
Whitening (bleaching): Brightens teeth that are discolored or stained. May be done at the dentist's office or at home with materials provided by the dentist.

Bonding: Improves the appearance of teeth that are chipped, broken, cracked or stained or have spaces between them. Tooth-colored materials are applied - bonded - to the tooth surface.

Enamel shaping: Modifying teeth to improve their appearance by removing or contouring enamel. Often combined with bonding.

Veneers: Thin, custom-made shells designed to cover the front side of teeth. Made of tooth-colored materials, veneers treat spaces between teeth and teeth that are chipped or worn, stained, poorly shaped or slightly crooked.

Braces: Straighten crooked or crowded teeth. Usually performed by an orthodontist.

SOURCE: American Dental Association

Caption:

APRIL SAUL / Inquirer

Naimah Buckner, dental patient, shows her smile.

DRAWING

(AMY JUNOD / Inquirer Staff Artist)PHOTO AND DRAWING

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