

If you are looking for exceptional quality, understand that you will pay at least some premium that will be recaptured by expected better appearance or longer life. This is your best choice if you can fit it into your budget. This happens to be the best way to a long term smile with less lifetime dental cost, improved health and better appearance.



The subject matter and opinions contained in this article come from Dr. Rob Strain's forty years of extensive dental experience, first as a beginning practitioner, then as a general dentist in an Orange County suburb, as a consultant to struggling dental practices, as a temporary dentist in managed care situations, and in his current health-centered aesthetic dental practice.

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More Smile
For Less \$\$\$



by Rob Strain, DDS

MORE SMILE FOR LESS MONEY

Today's consumer is more budget conscious than ever before. My experience is that more patients are asking valuable questions about their choices. At the same time, more patients than ever are opting for wise treatment decisions that can last a lifetime. How do you make your decisions?

There are four common models for patient decisions.

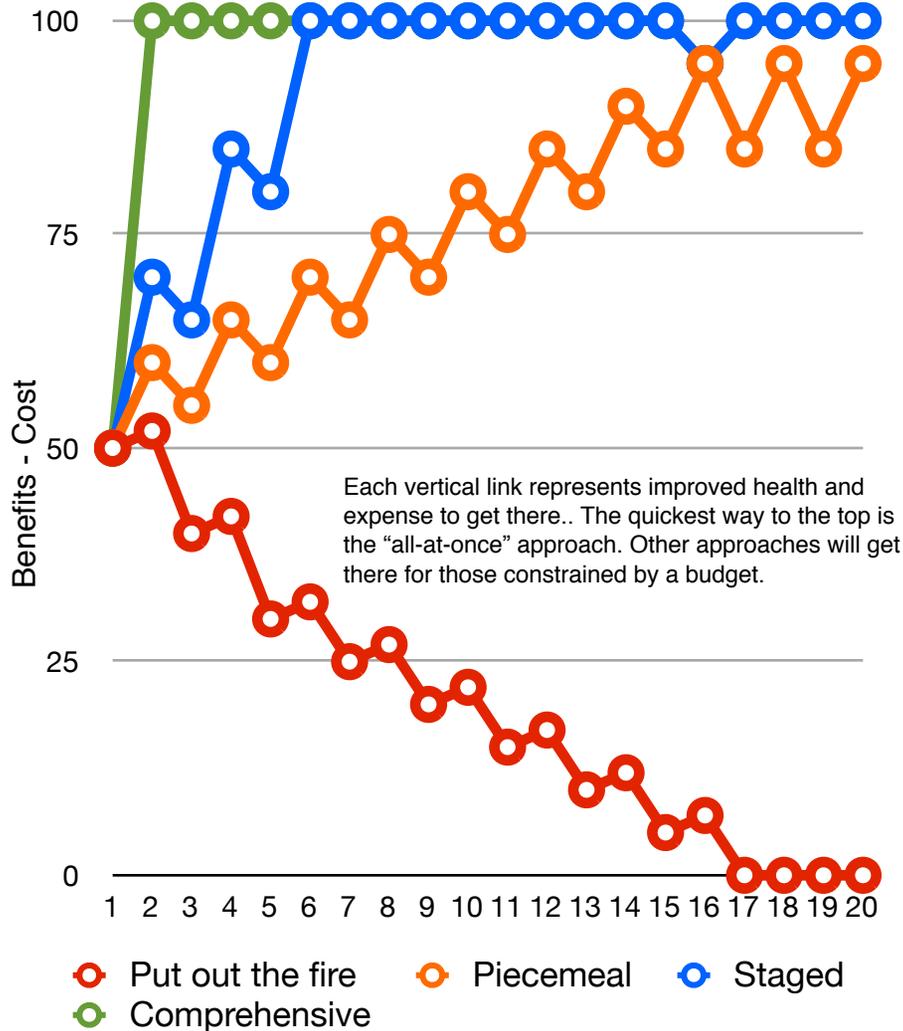
1. **Put out the fire:** The typical *put out the fire* patient (sometimes they use the phrase, "If it doesn't hurt, don't fix it") shows up every several years or so at the dentist. They are on a constant downward spiral towards losing most or all of their teeth. Many of these patients have had horrible experiences as a child. Others simply don't see or understand the value of an attractive or healthy smile. Their lives may be shortened as a result (more about this later). I sometimes see these patients when they are "beyond hope" and desperately want a smile back. They are usually very surprised at the high cost for remaining extractions and dentures and absolutely shocked at the cost of dental implants.
2. **Piecemeal:** The piecemeal patient will do a little dentistry every year. This patient may be motivated by a budget, insurance benefits or a tight schedule. This patient hopes and expects to avoid pain. What this patient does not realize is that while s/he is getting healthier in one part of the mouth, s/he is getting unhealthier in another part of the mouth. Reliance on dental insurance promotes this "two steps forward, two steps back approach.
3. **Staged treatment:** The *staged treatment* patient realizes there is a need to get healthy and there may be a desire for better appearance. Because the total amount of

dentistry may be overwhelming, one larger area of mouth is treated at one time. A typical "staged" patient may have periodontal health as the focus one year, the upper teeth the next year and the lower teeth the following year. There are many other ways treatment may be staged to fit into a budget.

4. **Comprehensive patient:** The comprehensive patient is looking to make major changes to health and appearance in a short period of time. This patient will typically complete all treatment in 3-6 months. The comprehensive patient requires personal resources or the ability to finance treatment complete the treatment rapidly. These patients may display dramatic improvements in appearance in such a short period. What is interesting is that the comprehensive patient may spend less money and achieve better health benefits than other patients.

Most dentists will offer alternatives to patients who are candidates for extensive dentistry. See if you can recognize each patient in the Cost/Benefit graph on the following page.

The goal is to get to the top of the chart. At that point, decisions are no longer difficult and rarely necessary. Dental related expenses are minimal.



What if you could be assured that you will have little or no drilling on your teeth during the last 20 years of your life? Would excellent dental health and minimal dental expense appeal to you? Most readers would be excited by this thought, but 35 years of experience demonstrates that fewer than 10 percent of dentists give their patients an opportunity to achieve a condition that makes this possible. Instead, dentists allow their patients to have ongoing breakdown of teeth as if it were a normal course of events.

Of course, you may be such a delightful patient that your return visits are eagerly anticipated! Your problems may provide the dentist with a steady stream of repair work, but this is not the dentist's intent. Rather, most dentists are simply too busy to take the time or responsibility for their patients' long term success, other than what can be covered by standard fees.

A well-respected orthodontist friend restores and collects classic cars. Once restored, he keeps these cars immaculate. He usually has six to eight cars in his garage at any one time. Anyone could see that the cars are spotless on the outside, but most of us could not tell the condition under the hood. The orthodontist would not panic if he had a tiny scratch in the paint...he knows how to fix that easily. But should he have gritty oil running through the engine, or rust starting in the frame, he might hyperventilate. He knows that a large part of his investment would be ruined if the engine or a hard-to-find part had to be completely replaced.

He rebuilt a Pierce Arrow from the late 1920's. It took almost a year and finally he announced to me that he was finished. Surprisingly, where beautiful upholstery was expected, were a bunch of bent wires. The paint looked more like an army tank. What he meant was that he was finished with everything that was difficult in restoring an antique car to perfect condition. The easy part was putting the esthetics on the car, which must wait for the inside work to be done. In

fact, for about \$5000 he was having someone else do that, so in reality, he had finished his project.

The message here is that your work is pretty much done when the underlying disease is under control. Finding a talented dentist to provide great esthetics is a much easier part. There are websites, such as *smilequest.com*, *topdentist.com* or *aacd.com* that will help you do just that.

Many of us look at our mouths much the way we would look at the Pierce Arrow. If we see a nice white smile, we think beauty. We are impressed by the outward appearance. Dentists can tell you that many beautiful smiles hide extreme disease conditions on the inside and mask a future of pain, tooth loss and expense.

Mouths are different from cars, of course. It is sometimes possible to create a more attractive smile with bleaching, cosmetic crowns or veneers *before* addressing the challenging work “under the hood”. In these cases, once the patient obtains a “dream smile”, the dental professional’s value is appreciated, then maintenance of health is seen to have greater value. This “outside in” approach can work, but is usually not the best choice. This approach also can compromise esthetics somewhat as increasing gum health is achieved. The following section describes some reasons why.

Your mouth as a whole

Your back teeth support your front teeth. Any changes in your bite in the back will affect the appearance and function of the front teeth. If you lose back teeth, the front teeth will receive greater biting forces and this may lead to bone breakdown, root fracture, unsightly spaces or excess wear. If your dentist rebuilds your back teeth after restoring your front teeth, you may be left with front teeth that can’t touch.

You will be frustrated when trying to bite together with your front teeth. Without your front teeth touching, your back teeth will be under greater stress when you chew from side-to-side. This can lead to increased bone loss and breakage of teeth, especially those teeth with existing fillings.

PRO-TIP for your crowns or veneers

Dentists who use follow up x-rays and exams to check the quality of the fit of the restorations they have placed, demonstrate their demand for high quality workmanship.

Getting back to that Pierce Arrow, there are some ways in which your mouth is (or should be) very much like a finely tuned classic car. The tartar and plaque under your gums can destroy the bony support for your teeth, much like dirty oil contributes to engine wear. Just as a car must have a smooth engine, balanced tires and safety features all working together, your mouth must have your teeth, musculature, jawbone and joints working in harmony for your comfort during the 20 to 30 year drive through the golden years. Everything must work and fit perfectly for this to happen.

We know the reputation developed by Mercedes automobiles. It is common to run these cars 200,000 to 300,000 miles. Your mouth needs to be like a Mercedes before it hits the difficult years ahead. This means any defective restorations (a word that includes fillings, crowns, veneers, etc.) should be replaced with ones that have a precision fit. Any new restoration should be perfect. No sloppy parts! Now, this is the hard part. It is very difficult for most patients to judge the technical skills of a dentist. This subject will be covered later in the Article “How to Select Your Dentist”. For now,

assume your dentist has exceptional skills, as many do. Then follow the PRO-TIPs...

Many dentists recommend long-term dental solutions, knowing that you have the right to choose to do the dentistry or not do the dentistry. If you want the benefits of a healthy mouth, but do not want more dental sessions for many years, then make these statements to your dentist:

"I want restorations that are the least likely to break down or leak in the next 20 years." If you are bold, substitute "30", for "20", but realize that most dentists haven't had 30 years experience watching restorations as they break down or leak.

"I am counting on your skills to help this work last until I die." This statement has a flattery element that will encourage the dentist to do the best he or she could ever do.

PRO-TIP It's your choice.

You are in charge of your dentistry. If you choose to do shorter-term dentistry, you will expect to have more replacements, greater tooth loss and more expenditure in the future. Most dentists understand this, and will work with you so you can have the dentistry you want as you can afford it.

Your investment in your mouth will pay you back many times over if it is done early and done well. One of the more difficult problems for a dentist is to have an 80 year-old patient come in needing major repairs. If the patient is treated like he or she has five years of life ahead, then treatment decisions may far underestimate what would keep the patient comfortable at 90 or 95. On the other hand, most dentists are sensitive to fixed incomes and the need to limit dentistry on the elderly. Everyone's life is easier if dentistry is done early and done right.

Can things go wrong? Of course they can! Dentistry cannot be guaranteed for your lifetime. But, armed with the PRO-TIPs, you can have a beautiful and healthy smile throughout your golden years. Dental problems should be least of your worries.

Let's Get Specific

Even with comparison shopping, it is difficult for patients to understand the difference in procedures performed at one dental office versus another office. Many times, these differences are a result of a "the management" making decisions on how to run a business profitably. Or the decisions may be based upon the dentist's standard of acceptable care. This can vary greatly from dentist to dentist.

Here are a few comparisons that will help you understand.

Dental Cleaning (Prophylaxis)

Fair - Dentist cleans teeth in about 10 minutes. Polishing may be by assistant.

Good - Hygienist cleans teeth in 30-45 minute appointment.

Best - Hygienist cleans teeth in 50-60 minute appointment; cleaning includes pocket measurement and products and home care instruction specifically for your situation.

Deep Scaling (Root Planing) to smooth root surfaces underneath the gums.

Fair - Multiple quadrants of the mouth planed in 15 minutes or less per quadrant. Local antibiotic fibers placed under the gum greatly increases fee.

Good- Multiple quadrants root planed in 30 minutes or less per quadrant.

Best - Multiple quadrants root planed averaging about 45 minutes per quadrant. May suggest adjunctive procedures such as laser pocket sterilization, specific products and/or periodontist referral.

Crowns

Fair - Offers non-precious crowns, but pushes for up charge on almost all procedures. The up charge is most likely for a porcelain-fused-to-gold crown (precious) or a zirconium crown. Usually uses a large lab with low fees.

Good- Offers a wide variety of choices. The standard crown is most likely porcelain fused to semi-precious metal. Up charges are most likely for all-ceramic crowns such as Emax. Uses a small or large lab with moderate fees and skills.

Best- Only offers porcelain-fused-to-gold (precious) and a selection of all-ceramic crowns best suited for you situation. Uses a small or specialized lab with above average fees and exceptional skills.

Veneers

Fair - Offers low fee veneers including Lumineers. Does not belong to the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry or other esthetic dentistry organizations. Does not display own work in office or on website. Uses large lab.

Good- May belong to cosmetic dental organizations and may show a few cases in office or online. Uses moderate size lab. Moderate fees.

Best - Offers a variety of veneers. Participates actively with a cosmetic dental organization. Has visual evidence of excellent cases in office and/or on website. Uses talented lab technicians, usually from smaller lab or “cosmetic” specialty lab. Higher fees.

Whatever level of dentistry you choose, you can be pretty sure you will get what you pay for. If you are looking for really low fees, you will be hard pressed to find a highly skilled dentist. This choice may be necessary for short term budget restraints, but should be accompanied by the knowledge that longevity may not be all you want it to be. My recommendation is to limit dentistry to basic procedures and be very responsible for your own dental health with good home care. You may find this possible with a talented younger dentist, especially if your challenges are straightforward, or a more experienced dentist if your challenges are more complex.