

Wisdom teeth

I read, with a great deal of interest, your article on wisdom teeth.¹ Since I am a retired dentist I wanted to comment on this article in a couple of respects.

I graduated from Dental School in 1973. I was taught that it was unnecessary to remove wisdom teeth unless there was a specific health reason to do so; i.e. there had to be an impaction, pericoronitis, etc.

However, it has been very common for orthodontists to insist on their removal for reasons of providing more room for re-alignment of the teeth, reducing forces that would push teeth forward, etc. As your article pointed out, these ideas have been somewhat discounted today.

One idea that wasn't really explored is the genetic selection problem. Our Western ideals of beauty tend toward the heart shaped face, at least in women. This will tend to select for people with smaller mandibles and therefore less space for the 3rd molars. I have had the opportunity to work with Eastern European and African individuals and they generally have more of a square face with (usually) more room for the third molars.

I would like to say that (at least in my practice) keeping the third molars was very useful for a number of reasons. Many parents often don't do much to take care of their children's teeth, and as a result, permanent six year molars are often lost at an early age.

In some cases, (with the help of an excellent oral surgeon) we were able to transplant the third molars into the space where the six year molars had been lost. This negated the need for more expensive treatments such as bridgework. (Just an example of one reason to keep those 'unnecessary' teeth.)

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References

1. Bergman, J., Are wisdom teeth (third molars) vestiges of human evolution? *TJ* 12(3):297-304, 1998.