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INSIDE STORY: LINGUAL BRACE

Lisping was a small price to pay for an invisible brace, says Sky News presenter Martin Popplewell.

Working in television does bad things for your vanity. A make-up artist removes the dark Dot Cotton-style bags from under your eyes. A stylist ensures that your suit, tie and shirt work together in perfect harmony with the colours of the studio. A good lighting director makes your skin appear to glow and your eyes sparkle.

It's the sort of environment in which old worries about your appearance begin to loom large. For me, it was my teeth. As a teenager, I had worn a brace but hadn't completed the treatment because a gap year abroad had interfered with visits to my orthodontist. Anyway, I thought to myself at the time, my teeth were much better than they had been.

Now, 16 years on, the fact that one of my front teeth stuck out slightly more than the other was really starting to bug me. But the thought of going on television looking like an overgrown teenager had stopped me from getting another brace.

Then I found a solution: a lingual brace. It's like a conventional fixed brace, but this one is attached to the inside of the teeth, not the outside, and to the casual observer it is completely invisible. The desire for the perfect smile, without looking like the James Bond villain Jaws, is making this type of treatment increasingly popular, and the UK's first clinic specialising in lingual braces has opened recently.

A perfect smile without anyone knowing that you're wearing a brace? Surely there had to be a downside. There was, as I discovered when I went back in front of the cameras after the procedure: lights, camera, and lisp! My orthodontist, Dr Asif Chatoo, told me at the start of treatment that my speech would be affected for a week or so and that my tongue would have to get used to the metal brackets on the inside of my teeth.

He was right. For the first few days it was impossible to speak without a lisp. Television news wasn't ready for a presenter who delivered stories sounding more like Jonathan Ross than Trevor McDonald.

For the first few days, I couldn't finish a single sentence without slurring or lisping at least one word.

Gradually, in the two weeks after my fitting, my speech improved but, unfortunately, my anxieties about delivering my lines properly also increased. Most worrying, whenever I felt under pressure my speech impediment seemed to return with a vengeance.

Of course, pressure is an integral part of working as a presenter in TV news. Having a producer shout "Breaking news, Martin! Breaking news!" into your ear as you stare down into the barrel of a camera with a red light on top of it is a quick way to raise your blood pressure.

But the pressure is even worse when you're not sure if you will be able to articulate the words because you've got a mouth full of metal.

Often with breaking news came an inability to say "th". The Netherlands rejected the European constitution, but I couldn't say the Netherlands. I persevered for two hours. It wasn't working. Thankfully, there was a substitute word: Holland. It wasn't always so easy.

My speech did improve the longer I wore the brace, however, and somehow I muddled through. I think that my perception of my lisp was greater than the reality. Most of my friends said they couldn't hear it at all.

It wasn't just speaking that I had to re-learn. Eating was a whole new experience, too. My first lunch after having the brace fitted was a rocket salad. The odd bit of spinach stuck between your teeth is nothing compared with having half a rocket salad dangling down from inside your mouth.

A lot of my time was spent sucking my teeth after eating to extract the other half of my meal. I started eating less and, to my delight, I lost weight, including two inches off my waist over a period of six months.

Anne Diamond and others, listen up. Forget a gastric band operation. You can have a lingual brace, so you can fix your teeth and lose weight at the same time. My lingual brace might have been almost invisible to everyone else, but I rarely forgot it was there. The tongue is very sensitive and has the ability to magnify everything. Imagine what it's like having what seems like a miniature climbing frame inside your mouth. After nine months of treatment, my tongue knew every bracket, every twist and every bend in the wire of my brace.

Each month, I returned to Dr Chatoo to have the adjustments made to my brace and slowly but surely I could see my teeth begin to straighten. I found myself counting down the months, weeks and then days to the release from the metal prison inside my mouth. But nine months later it was all over: and it was worth it. Now I know I have the best smile that I can possibly have.

A few weekends after my brace was removed, I was behind the Sky News desk presenting coverage of the death of Slobodan Milosevic. It wasn't pronouncing the name of the former Yugoslav President that I was worried about, but where he died.

But I sailed through and could tell everyone that he died in the Netherlands.

BRACE YOURSELF

- >> The lingual brace works in the same way as a conventional (or labial) brace: tiny metal brackets are attached to each tooth with a wire that slowly pulls the teeth into the correct alignment after regular visits to the orthodontist for adjustments.
- >> The typical cost of a lingual brace on either your upper or lower teeth is £3,600, but complex cases treating both upper and lower can go up to £8,000.
- >> Lingual braces are not available on the NHS.
- >> Although orthodontic treatment is usually taken for cosmetic reasons, there are often clinical grounds. Sometimes teeth move in later life and an incorrect bite may cause more wear and tear on your teeth as well as aching jaws, head and neck.
- >> Dr Asif Chatoo's London Lingual Orthodontic Clinic, www.londonlingualbraces.com; 020-7486 2883.
- >> The British Orthodontic Society website, www.bos.org.uk.
- >> The British Lingual Orthodontic Society website, www.blos.co.uk.