

# Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

## Rachel's Story

This essay was handed to me by one of my patients on completion of her orthodontic treatment. She had a severe Class III malocclusion, which was treated with a combination of orthodontics, Le Fort I advancement and sagittal split set back of the mandible.

I found its contents quite moving and very interesting. It certainly gave me an insight into the effect that treatment can have on patients to which I was previously ignorant. In addition, it also demonstrates how an osteotomy is not a purely cosmetic procedure, but its effects are much wider. I hope that you will get as much from reading it as I did.

"I was 11 or 12 years old when I started to realize that something was happening to my bottom jaw. As it kept growing bigger, eating became more difficult as my teeth moved further out of line. Other children at school would laugh when I was eating lunch, at the way I was now forced to chew my food, and I had the added embarrassment of being unable to eat a sandwich without the filling falling out. I was taunted and called names such as 'Desperate Dan.'

I was dreading changing schools thinking what I had put up with at primary school would be much worse at senior school. I was right, only even I didn't dream that it would get as bad as it did. I put on around two stone in weight through what I now believe to be comfort eating and I would get into fights because of the taunts. I became tough and aggressive to others, and started to look for their weakness. Perhaps, I thought, if I hurt them first they wouldn't be able to hurt me.

At the onset of all this I had always been a happy outgoing girl, full of confidence and bubbly. Now I was turning in on myself, my confidence shattered. I would cover my face when eating or laughing (which wasn't very often), and shy away from contact with other children outside my immediate circle of friends,

After a particularly bad day, I came home from school and asked my father if anything could be done about my jaw. We spoke to our dentist about orthodontic treatment and I was a little disappointed when he said that nothing could be done until I had stopped growing. Even then it would be a long hard struggle with many visits to the orthodontic clinic, having some teeth removed, the wearing of braces on my teeth, and then, after 3 or 4 years, a major operation to look forward to. All this and no promises as to the outcome! However, there was a chance, a glimmer of hope that, somewhere far off in the distant future, this torture and torment I was now suffering might come to an end. So I said 'let's get started'.

Nine months later, all I got out of my first visit was a mouthful of impressions, a lot of X-rays, and another explanation of what to expect, including a referral to the surgeons if they decided to go ahead with the treatment!

If they decided to go ahead? The thought of a refusal at this stage had not crossed my mind. Panic set in. Would the orthodontist reject me, as well as my schoolmates? Was my jaw too far out to be put back in line or could it possibly

be not far enough out to require surgery? Questions flashed through my mind, although they did say they would be able to help in some way, but would need to study the X-rays and impressions before a final decision could be made.

A further appointment was booked, but it was 6 months away. I had to wait all that time to see what, if any, treatment I would get. It sounded a long time, but to my relief it passed quite quickly. I went along nervous, no, worried, they would say there was nothing they could do. They decided to take me on, recommending the following: orthodontic treatment, which included teeth being removed and fixed braces, followed by a bimaxillary osteotomy.

I was so elated couldn't believe it, I knew there was a long way to go, but I was on the starting blocks and on my next visit the braces would be fitted. Was I really going to be normal, like other kids? Would I be able to eat a sandwich without losing the filling? Would I be able to chew without other kids laughing at me?

I tried to convince myself that I was having the operation for the reasons above, but deep down somewhere I knew I wasn't. It was to stop the morons calling me names and to allow me to have a normal life. To have a boyfriend, be able to eat in public, go to sleep at night without the thought of what new names I would be called tomorrow.

Having the braces fitted brought a fresh round of name-calling and one of the school bullies joined in. She was aggressive and often chased me calling me names. This went on for weeks until one day we ended up fighting. I'm still not sure what happened, but what I do know is that she took a beating for all the years of torment. All my suffering was released in one fight. I punched, I kicked, I may even have bitten and scratched, and she got the lot. She had to be taken to hospital, the police charged me with assault, and I received a caution. Was it worth it? You bet it was!

I was very low at this time and now, as I was getting older, I was finding the name-calling harder to bear. All my friends now had boyfriends, so I didn't go out much of an evening. I would stay at home and watch telly in my bedroom becoming more isolated. As the time passed, the braces were pushing my teeth further apart. This was to allow them to meet after the operation, but it made eating even more difficult, making me an even bigger target for the name callers.

I felt things were really moving when I met the orthodontist and oral surgeon together again. We went through what was to happen and how the surgery would be performed. By now I had stopped growing so that side of me was ready. We discussed my exams and decided I would go into hospital in June. It seems daft, but I didn't want that appointment to finish.

Some of my friends tried to talk me out of having the operation saying it was cosmetic surgery. Did they not realise the effect this was having on me? Maybe not, because when I was with them I was all right, nothing to hide, and somewhat at ease, but they couldn't change my mind. Nothing could.

Then, possibly the worst insult of all came from a teacher when she said, 'if I had a dog as ugly as you I would put it down'. Nice teacher, eh? When a friend told my parents, because I was too embarrassed, they went 'spare' and after a visit to school I was taken out of the teacher's class. Another teacher moved me to the front of the class for talking one day so I flashed him a smile to try and get out of it. He just turned and said 'don't flash your metal at me.' I remember the class going quiet, along with a few sniggers. It made me feel so small.

I was getting closer to my goal, and over the next year the braces did their job and my teeth were in the correct position. I was still being pursued by the name callers, but I could see an end to it now. At school people used to call me stupid names because of my jaw. Looking back now, I know I shouldn't have let it get to me, but it did, it got to me a lot. People could call me for anything else and I'd just laugh at them, but if they said anything about my jaw I couldn't stand it.

At my next appointment, I was introduced to the surgeon who was to perform the operation in a few weeks time. Although I wanted the operation more than anything, I would be telling lies if I said I wasn't now worried, scared. In fact, I was terrified, but tried not to show it for my parent's sake. I think they were worried themselves.

It finally got to the weekend before I was due to go in and I needed to do something to help me relax, so I went for a night out. It really helped me feel better; I sort of put the operation to the back of my mind. The night out really helped because it gave me something to remember while I was in hospital.

The operation was a 4–5-hour job. It involved my bottom jaw being broken and moved back about 9 mm. The top jaw had to be brought forward, but I don't know how much.

I actually went into hospital on Sunday 6th July 1997. It is a day I will never forget because I've never been so scared in all my life. My stomach started to turn, my legs felt like jelly, I couldn't move, I felt a lump coming up in my throat, I was so nervous words cannot explain how I felt, especially when the porter came for me, it felt like something was eating me from inside out. I was given the anaesthetic and that is all I can remember.

The second day after the operation they took me off the

drip and the first thing I did was look in the mirror. I'll never forget what I saw. It looked like I had been beaten round the head with a baseball bat. I remember the tears welling up in my eyes, but I held them back. I was determined not to cry. I wasn't sure if I wanted to cry because I was shocked at the state of my face or because I was glad it was all over. From that day on I was paranoid because I felt like people were staring at me. Every time I left my room I walked with my hair over my face so people could not see me. One night, after my mum and dad had left, I stood in front of the mirror for ages thinking was it worth it? Then, when tears started to roll, they just wouldn't stop, now when I look back I know I just felt sorry for myself.

The first day I left the hospital I went to my old school to see the teachers. I hated everyone looking at me, but I was not going to let it get to me. That was the first time I held my head high and I have ever since. I haven't cried since that day, now I don't let anything get to me. If someone asked me if it was worth it I'd have to say 'Yes! Without a doubt! If I had to do it all over again I would.'

Now, nearly a year later, when I look back and think about what I went through while I was growing up, its like it wasn't my life. The operation did change my life in ways I never thought it would. I now have a lot more confidence than I ever had. I'm a bit louder as well, because now I don't care what people think: they either like me or they don't, but that is their problem not mine. I'll never forget how scared I felt the night before, but it has made me into a better person. I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who was involved in my operation. I'd also like to thank all my friends and family they were there when I needed them.

Now I enjoy life as much as possible. I go out at least every fortnight, and my friends and family have been brilliant. They are the most important things in my life besides having a good time."

RACHEL

"As a footnote we, Rachel's parents, would like to thank everyone involved in her treatment.. You have given us back something so precious—our daughter as she was many years ago, confident, outgoing and—*smiling!*"

NIGEL FOX