

Sweet smell of success Paul Edwards 25th October 2007

Fed up with other people's bad breath, this dentist built a business on solving it, writes Paul Edwards. CONVENTIONAL workplace wisdom contends that we don't have problems - they're merely challenges leading to opportunities. One man's bad luck is often another's opportunity. And so, for Dr Geoffrey Speiser, the problem of halitosis has led to a thriving business called the Australian Breath Clinic, which has looked into the mouths of more than 10,000 Australians. Much of his marketing approach leans heavily on education through media commentary and public speaking. The internet and public relations are also used. Many of the clinic's services are free, including the message that there's hope for sufferers. The clinic often finds interesting things - like a set of dentures that hasn't left the patient's mouth for 45 years. "She later revealed that she thought she would stop breathing and die if ever she removed them," Dr Speiser recalls. "You can imagine the waft of smell that came from 45-year-old cheese pieces and meat sinew caught under those dentures and let me tell you my nice blue dentist's mask was not stopping the smell getting through.



Dr Speiser performs a special breath test

"I'm always being asked why I chose this specialisation, how I can possibly spend my days helping people with a condition that has others recoiling. But when you've seen first hand how bad breath and bad breath phobia - halitophobia - can affect some people, it's actually a very serious matter. "I've seen people who are suicidal because they've tried seemingly every treatment known to man - and some unconventional ones too - and visited countless dentists but still have bad breath. "Many are on the brink of despair as their fear of bad breath has held them back from meeting a partner or going for the job of their dreams. Faced with people who have such serious reactions to their bad breath, I've found it's necessary to cultivate a sense of humour to

balance it all out. Certainly thinking about some of the more quirky tales of patients often helps." The halitosis bug bit Dr Speiser in 1997 when, after practising dentistry for about 16 years in several Australian locations, he noticed a common thread that united a significant number of patients: they had bad breath. "There was no rational, medical answer to explain why such a large number of people had bad breath." Half the sufferers realised they had bad breath and were frustrated because they had tried everything, while the other half had no idea. "It begs the question, when should bad breath be treated? When you smell, or when you care that you smell? Hopefully a study we are currently undertaking with our dental and breath patients will answer this question. "I was fortunate enough to make a connection with the leading expert on bad breath in the US and realised that, despite being so widespread, treatment of bad breath was steeped in old wives' tales and not much proper science." Dr Speiser says the discovery of probiotics - good bacteria - in particular *Streptococcus salivarius* K12 changed his life. "Through the course of my research, I came across the findings of Professor John Tagg, head of microbiology at the University of Otago, in New Zealand. He had made the groundbreaking discovery that this probiotic which occurs naturally in the mouth, assisted in the treatment of bad breath." A meeting with Professor Tagg was a real eye opener, or jaw-dropper. Until that point, bad breath had been predominantly linked to diets and poor oral hygiene, although Dr Speiser knew that most people with bad breath had no problem with their teeth or gums and consumed fairly normal diets. "Professor Tagg's discovery opened up a stream of thinking which enabled us to focus on the real cause of bad breath - the imbalance of bacteria in the mouth. This, in turn, heralded an innovative and straightforward approach to treating bad breath. "In the past, treatments had focused on killing germs and disinfecting the mouth, but clearly this had failed the hundreds of bad breath sufferers I had encountered. A far more effective solution was to address the imbalance of bad breath bacteria by using good bacteria. It was simple, effective and quite simply brilliant." Dr Speiser became involved in developing products that combined probiotic research and proven dental science to treat bad breath. Shortly after his meeting with Professor Tagg, he established the Australian Breath Clinic. "My goal was to share my knowledge of probiotics with bad breath sufferers and help the growing numbers of

patients who came knocking on my door - word had spread fast that there was a dentist who took bad breath seriously. "Since then, the Australian Breath Clinic has treated well over 10,000 people and been very involved in identifying more precise methods of distinguishing and treating the causes of bad breath. "For example, in conjunction with the University of Otago, the clinic has published a study which proves that disinfectant - used in most over-the-counter mouthwash - is inadequate in controlling bad breath in the long term. "More recently, we've begun to research what a person's breath can tell us about their state of health and hygiene. I'm really proud of the fact that we were the first clinic in the world to recognise that bad breath is composed of multi-smell compounds and each comes from a different part of the mouth. Our treatment is that specific." The clinic is represented in Victoria and NSW.