

It's a gas!

Dentistry and cartoons

Jacqueline Healy

'It's a gas!' is an expression meaning something is hilarious or funny. A possible origin is the effect of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) on one's behaviour. In 2016 an exhibition of dental cartoons and associated dental instruments, photographs and documents, called *It's a gas! Dentistry and cartoons*, was curated by the University of Melbourne's Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, for display in the space of the Medical History Museum on the Parkville campus. A substantial publication of the same title, with contributions from leading dental clinicians, academics and medical historians, accompanied the exhibition.

Nitrous oxide gas was first synthesised by the English chemist Joseph Priestley in 1772, and first used to anaesthetise a dental patient in 1844. Anaesthetics transformed dental care, significantly improving both the immediate comfort and the longer-term health of the patient. But here lies the dichotomy that pervades cartoons about dentistry: the desire for dental work as essential and necessary to relieve pain, swelling or other problems, combined with a fear of the pain and discomfort of the dental treatment itself. And there is yet another element: the (somewhat unfair) suspicion about the extent of the dentist's empathy with the patient.



Opposite: Lucas Van Leyden, *The dentist*, 1523, engraving, sheet and image 11.5 × 7.5 cm. 1959.3194, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below: Peter Nicholson, *Rudd as dentist*, artwork for cartoon published in *The Australian*, 28 July 2009, digital print, image 21.0 × 31.0 cm. 3146, Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, University of Melbourne. © Peter Nicholson and *The Australian*.

From 16th-century engravings and etchings to 21st-century newspaper cartoons, images are pervaded by this fear of the dentist, who is the butt of many jokes. Many of the comic elements in the cartoons and illustrations are based on traditions or turning points in dental practice.

The history of dentistry reveals the metamorphosis of the profession from blacksmiths, barbers and tooth-pullers to highly qualified health specialists.

An intriguing question to ask is, 'What are the elements of dental practice that evoke spectacle?' Early dentists often practised in marketplaces

in front of a crowd, where some people were waiting for treatment, while others gathered for the entertainment. The 80 illustrations and cartoons in the exhibition are grouped according to seven themes: *Fear and pain*, *First tooth*, *Toothache*, *Laughing gas*, *Tooth care and extraction*, *Expense*, *celebrity*



George du Maurier, *Female dentistry*, published in *Punch, or The London Charivari*, 1 November 1879, p. 203, woodblock engraving, image 13.0×10.5 cm. 3144, gift of Gordon Morrison 2016, Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, University of Melbourne.



and vanity, and *Political cartoons*. In *Fear and pain*, suspicion of the dentist is reflected in the iconic image of the tooth-puller, which persists in illustrations and cartoons across centuries and continents. Lucas van Leyden's famous engraving of 1523 (see p. 4) exemplifies iconography used by many subsequent artists: a well-dressed dentist (displaying his qualifications in the official-looking document with prominent wax seal) ministers to a trusting patient whose shabby clothes show him to be a member of the poorer classes. Meanwhile the dentist's assistant slyly takes money from the patient's purse—even before the extraction is completed. Despite dramatic advances in dental technologies, medications and treatments, all of which should help remove anxiety about a visit to the dentist, this iconography persists even today. The exhibition and publication *It's a gas!* trace this imagery through illustrations and cartoons dating from the 16th century to now, as well as including items from public and private collections mapping the changes in dental practices and beliefs in the context of parody and humour.

Political cartoons links back to the first theme of *Fear and pain*, as the powerful political figure (usually a dentist) extracts a tooth (a hard-

Right: Dental extracting key, c. 1830, ivory and steel, 15.5 × 10.0 cm. 661, gift of the Australian College of Dentistry 1963, Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, University of Melbourne.

Below: Wm Ford & Co. (Melbourne), *Ford's Cherry Tooth Paste*, c. 1880, ceramic and glaze, 7.8 × 4.5 cm diameter. MHM05951, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.



earned gain) from a rival politician or powerless member of the public, exemplified by Peter Nicholson's cartoon of an over-enthusiastic Prime Minister Kevin Rudd extracting teeth from an alarmed taxpayer. Indeed, the power that the dentist holds over the patient is an element that recurs in nearly all seven of the exhibition's themes.

Another political issue emerges in the George du Maurier cartoon *Female dentistry* (see opposite), published in *Punch* in 1879 and questioning the ability of women to be dentists, due to their supposed lack of physical strength. The woman dentist stands, forceps in hand, looking in despair at her hapless patient. In reality, it was not until 1895 that Lilian Lindsay (née Murray, 1871–1960) became the first woman dentist to graduate in the United Kingdom—from Edinburgh Dental School. She went to Edinburgh because she was unable to gain admittance to the Royal College of Surgeons in London. Women could not gain a dental qualification there for another 17 years. The first female graduate from Melbourne Dental School was Fannie Gray, in 1907.

Interestingly, as well as displaying the cartoons, this exhibition brings to light artefacts, photographs, documents and ephemera from two collections of the Faculty of Medicine,

Dentistry and Health Sciences—the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum and the Medical History Museum—to illustrate some of the history of dentistry that the cartoons evoke. These items reveal turning points in dentistry and also provide insights into the cartoons. *It's a gas!* gathered together these different types of displays in order to navigate the history and humour of dentistry, helping us understand our fears, beliefs and vanities, and what makes us laugh.

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The exhibition *It's a gas! Dentistry and cartoons* is on display at the Medical History Museum (on the second floor of the Brownless Biomedical Library) until 3 September 2016. The book of the same title can be purchased from the Co-op Bookshop (coop.com.au).

The Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum is located on the ground floor of the Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne, 720 Swanston Street, Carlton.

