

# The social importance of teeth

**Tim Newton, Professor of Psychology as Applied to Dentistry, discusses two areas of research which he has been involved with over the last few years**

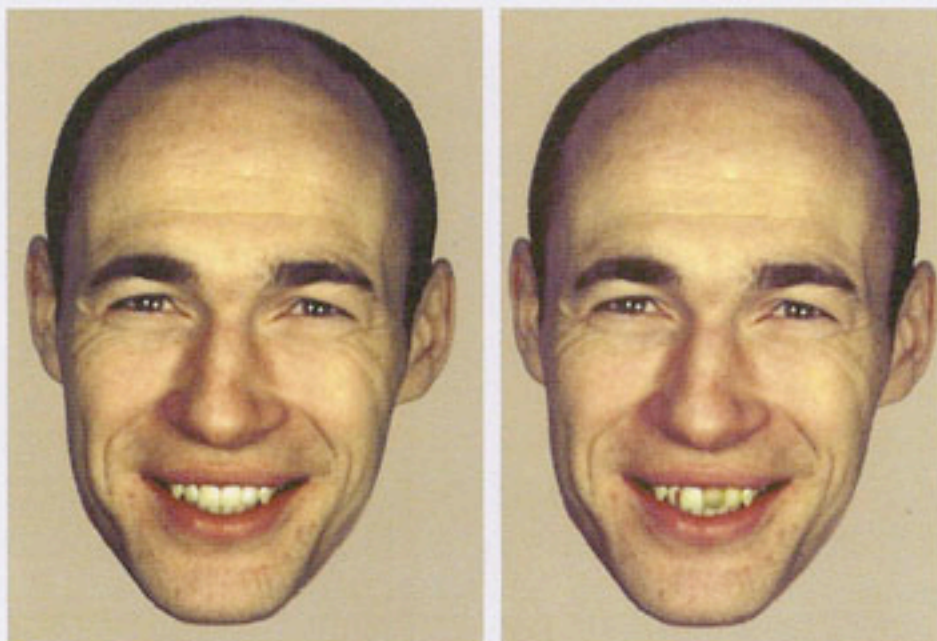
**D**entistry provides many opportunities for psychologists to study aspects of human behaviour and thought, while offering dental practitioners the chance to learn from the understanding that psychologists bring to dentistry. King's College London Dental Institute is the only dental school in the United Kingdom to have a Professor of Psychology as Applied to Dentistry, Tim Newton. This article will explore two areas in which he and colleagues from Oral Health Services Research & Dental Public Health have been involved. Namely, the social impact of dental disease, and workforce planning in dentistry.

## **The teeth have it**

Social psychologists have long known that a range of positive qualities are ascribed to people who are considered attractive. In a series of studies Tim Newton and colleagues have explored how individuals make judgements of others on the basis of the appearance of their teeth. Using digital technology to alter the appearance of a face, the ratings made by the general public concerning the social and psychological adjustment of the person shown were compared for faces with and without visible

decay. Both studies found that people with visible dental decay were rated as less popular, less clever and less well adjusted than the same person shown without decay.

Their initial studies showed that the presence of visible caries results in individuals making more negative judgements about the person shown. Recently the impact of tooth colour has been explored using a similar methodology, pictures of men and women who showed their teeth when they smiled were digitally modified to one of three conditions: decayed teeth, their natural teeth, and 'whitened' teeth. For both pictures, the individual was perceived as most attractive when their teeth had been whitened. This increase in ratings of attractiveness was associated with higher scores on measures of perceived social competence and intellectual ability. The presence of decay was again found to be associated with lower scores on perceived social competence and intellectual ability, and this effect was greatest for the pictures of women. This is a fascinating finding given the growth in 'aesthetic' dentistry in recent years, particularly tooth whitening procedures.



When people are shown computer-modified photographs of the same face with and without visible dental decay, they consistently believe that those with decay are less clever and popular and less well-adjusted.