Some smiles need special braces

Health: New respect for ethnic variations applied to teeth and gums.

By Samantha Gonzaga
Staff writer

Ray Sugiyama, an orthodontist, has cooperated with his colleague Mauricio Gonzalez Balut to develop specially crafted braces for Asians and Latinos to accommodate slight but significant differences between the different ethnic groups. He has traveled to Asia and South America to share his findings and inventions.

Leo Hetzel / Press-Telegram

LOS ALAMITOS —There may be no such thing as "one size fits all" when it comes to braces.

Especially for Asian, black and Hispanic patients, who for years were fitted with braces based on measurements for Caucasians.

To compensate for the slight but significant differences among ethnicities, orthodontists Ray Sugiyama and Mauricio Gonzalez Balut began crafting special prescriptions for Asians and Latinos a few years ago.

To serve Asian American patients, they created SEBA, an acronym for Sugiyama Evidence-Based Asian prescription. Their ProTorque model is for Latinos.

"Orthodontists have to look at a person and think, 'What is the natural look I want to preserve?' " said Sugiyama, who practices on Farquhar Street in Los Alamitos.

Fifteen years ago, Sugiyama detected a pattern among patients. Asians, blacks and Latinos had noticeably flatter profiles after the removal of their braces than whites.

All had been using the only model universally prescribed at the time, which was based on Caucasian facial dimensions. While the model effectively straightened teeth, it also forced unnatural alignment in non-Caucasian patients.

The re-positioning is subtle yet has a major effect: the movement of teeth affected the position of lips and overall facial balance.

To better understand how teeth of various ethnicities responded to the prescription, Sugiyama and Gonzalez Balut recorded and analyzed the cephalometric measurements — the relationship of bones with each other, bones with teeth, and teeth with each other — of thousands of Caucasians, African Americans, Asians and Latinos.

The differences were jaw-dropping.

According to their data, the natural inclination of upper and lower teeth varied greatly between Caucasians and non-Caucasians. Caucasians averaged 134.6 degrees; Hispanics, 121.7 degrees; Asians, 124.5 degrees; and African Americans, 118 degrees.

The anatomy of teeth also differed. Caucasian teeth are smaller, more inclined to side-to-side angling, smooth and thin.

Asians' and those of Mexicans from the Yucatan Peninsula area were startlingly similar, Sugiyama said.

Their teeth have lingual and labial ridges in the back, which were often ground to accommodate conventional braces. They are also wider, shorter and thicker, and therefore are less prone to side-to-side angling.

SEBA and ProTorque braces' designs address these differences by increasing the braces' torque, vertical tension placed on the teeth.

The country's growing minority populations make the braces timely, Sugiyama said. According to U.S. Census numbers, the nation's Latino population rose 9.8 percent between 2000 and 2002 to 38.8 million. As the second-fastest growing group, Asians had a 9 percent population increase, raising their total number to 12.7 million.

SEBA and ProTorque inspired Gonzalez Balut's new biogenetic compatibility therapy. In measuring mouths for braces, the "different facial structures and positioning of teeth" also need to be taken into consideration.

"If you have a sick person, it's like using penicillin for every illness," Gonzalez Balut said in a phone interview from his home in Mexico City. "This is like trying to find the right medicine."

Sugiyama first noticed the effects of the Caucasian-based braces on his Hispanic patients when their profiles drastically changed. Lips were pulled in, and the diagonal distance between nose tip and mouth were more steep.

There are no immediate dangers for teeth straightened with the universal braces' prescription, but they raise the risk for receding gums, root-shortening and crow's feet wrinkles above the upper lip for women.

SEBA and ProTorque's popularity is slow to spread in the United States but has experienced positive feedback in Mexico, Gonzalez Balut said. The top two orthodontics distributors passed on them, but they were immediately snapped up by Wisconsin-based American Orthodontics.

No one in the community has rejected their findings, but the concept behind the braces is taking longer to absorb in older circles, Sugiyama theorized.

"We are trying to change the way the orthodontic community is thinking," Gonzalez Balut said. "We are trying to expose the community to these new brackets."

Long Beach looks for preservation officer

Community: Cindy Thomack leaves after eight months.

By Greg Mellen
Staff writer

Cindy Thomack vacated the office of historic preservation officer for Long Beach on Thursday after eight months. The city already has a list of applicants.

Leo Hetzel / Press-Telegram

LONG BEACH — The city of Long Beach is looking for its third full-time historic preservation officer in 16 years.

The first, Ruthann Lehrer, had the job for 14 years. The second, Cindy Thomack, left Thursday after a little more than eight months. She had replaced Harold Simkins, who retired after serving on an interim basis.

Suzanne Frick, the city's new director of planning and building, said an intensive search for a replacement would begin immediately and that she hoped a new officer could be hired within two months.

The historic preservation officer helps oversee requests to create historic districts, such as Bluff Park, California Heights and Rose Park, and helps maintain the character of the city's older neighborhoods.

Frick said because of Thomack's short tenure, the city still had a relatively current list of applicants. She said a panel of staff and residents interested in historic preservation would be assembled to begin interviewing candidates.

Jerry Olivera will serve as interim preservation officer.

Thomack, who left the position for a job with a private firm in Atlanta, could not be reached for comment.

Layne Johnson, chairman of the Cultural Heritage Commission, which works closely with the preservation officer, said there had been a heavy workload.

"It just ended up being a tremendous volume of work coming through the office," Johnson said.

As an example, Johnson pointed out that his group's monthly meetings, which dealt with projects forwarded by the historic preservation office, have become twice as long as they once were. In some months, the commission has had to schedule extra sessions to catch up.

The city had been interviewing candidates to work in the preservation office as an assistant to the preservation officer. That search will be suspended until a new full-time department head is found.

Although Frick is new to the job, having replaced Fady Mattar, who retired as acting director of building and planning, she said she heard good things about Thomack.

"From all reports, she did a good job under difficult circumstances," Frick said.

Despite the challenges of the preservation officer's job, Frick said she believed there were rewards from being able to "preserve the historical character of a community."

Chemical empties post office, gym

By Samantha Gonzaga
Staff writer

LOS ALAMITOS —A package leaking nail salon chemicals led to the evacuation of the Los Alamitos Post Office at 10650 Reagan St. and a gymnastics center next door late Saturday morning, authorities said.

At 11:36 a.m., post office employees detected a strong smell from the package as they processed it along with other mail at the back of the building, said Orange County Fire Capt. Stephen Miller.

They attempted to clean up the leak it caused with a spill kit but became dizzy and developed minor headaches in the process, Miller said.

The package contained materials used to apply acrylic nails, such as acetone and an acrylic base.

The building was quickly evacuated. About 16 employees were treated at the scene for chemical inhalation. About 100 children were also evacuated from Quality Gymnastics.

"It was precautionary," Miller said. "But because there was a lot of children we had to until we knew what we had there."

The hazardous material team sent to the scene completed the cleanup the employees originally started. By 2:30 p.m., the post office was turned over to the post master general, Miller said.

No serious injuries were reported.