

Brace yourselves

People are following the example of celebrities and turning to orthodontists to improve the look of their teeth. Joy Sable reports

The new contracts for dentists introduced by the government have sparked fears that free dental care on the NHS is about to be denied to all but a few patients.

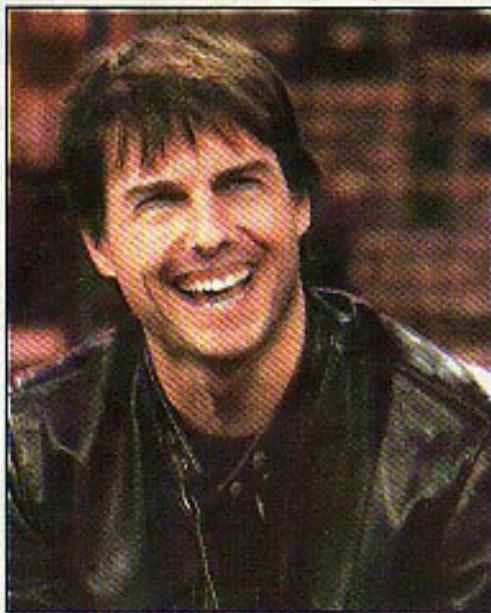
The latest guidelines also affect orthodontists, as the Department of Health has raised the bar on how badly crooked teeth have to be before free treatment to straighten them becomes available.

This comes at a time when it has never been more popular to have cosmetic work on your teeth. Tom Cruise, Gwen Stefani and Prince William have all had braces on their teeth, and their winning smiles are the result of extensive orthodontic treatment.

Years ago, many children dreaded going to school wearing braces, as they would be subjected to playground teasing. Today, even 12-year-olds with enough metalwork in their mouths to rival the James Bond villain "Jaws," are happy to put up with a couple of years of corrective dental work in the knowledge that the result will be a dazzling set of gnashers.

Dr Shaunak Popat is one of a number of specialist orthodontists working at the Angle House practice in Edgware. He says that there is no longer any stigma attached to having a brace.

"In fact, children want the treatment. [Far from trying to hide the



Smiles better: Tom Cruise famously wore a brace

fact] they have already talked to their friends in the playground about having the treatment."

And even the most fashion-conscious kids can put up with a mouthful of metal when the tiny elastic bands that are worn with the braces can be colour-co-ordinated to match their clothes.

Sabrina Lester, from Stanmore, is 11 years old and had a brace fitted last year. "I was nervous at first, because I didn't know what it would feel like. But I've got used to it now. Quite a

few of my friends have got them too," she says.

It's not just children who can be found happily hopping into the orthodontist's chair. "The biggest change I've seen is that there are more and more adults having treatment," says Dr Popat. "There are a couple of reasons for this — firstly, they might have missed out when they were younger, and secondly, they feel it will improve their image and self-confidence if they have a smile that makes their face stand out.

"Tom Cruise has set up a trend. Even now, adults will say: 'Can I have a Tom Cruise brace,' — a tooth-coloured brace which doesn't show as much as a silver one."

Mother-of-two Caroline Field decided to have treatment to improve her smile. "My front two teeth at the top were crossed."

She considered having cosmetic work, but decided that a long-term orthodontic appliance might be more successful. "It was painful — I had to have two teeth taken out, which was traumatic. And I had to have a brace on for 20 months."

She admits that if she knew how painful the process was going to be, she may not have begun treatment. But she says that she is very pleased with the result.

"I have no regrets whatsoever," she smiles.