

Dentistry with no pain

nOT long ago when he needed to go to the dentist his mother would drive him there and drag him into the surgery. He then had to be strapped into the chair and given a general anaesthetic to knock him out cold before his dentist could work on him.

This might be quite understandable behaviour in a toddler but Johnny Lange* is a strapping man in his early twenties.

"I know it's weird. Some people fear spiders or heights but I've had a phobia about going to the dentist since I was a child," he says. "That's when I started associating dentists with excruciating pain so even just walking through the door into the waiting room was enough to reduce me to a gibbering wreck."

But these days it's a different story. The last time he went for a check-up he sat in the chair calmly even after he'd been told he had a cavity that needed filling. And when his dentist set to work no anaesthetic was necessary – because his dentist was

using a revolutionary new procedure that arrived in South Africa only recently.

Instead of administering painful injections and lengthy drilling, dentists can now treat a tooth by simply delivering a blast of ozone to the area.

Ozone – a gas we can smell in the air during thunderstorms – is the strongest natural bacteria-zapper known to man, which makes it perfect for use in the treatment of dental infections (which is what a cavity is) as well as infections in other parts of the body.

It's quick, effective and painless. Another plus is you may not need an unsightly filling – if you have a smallish cavity all you'll need is a tooth-coloured sealant or "smart filling" which will help your tooth heal itself until it looks as good as new.

SEEMS a lot has changed over the past few years. Gadgets that would once have belonged in the realm of science fiction are now standard fixtures in many dental practices.

These days instead of an old-fashioned mirror and probe lots

A laser detects cavities, a quick squirt of gas cleans out the infection and a smart filling patches the tooth until it can heal itself. This isn't sci-fi but a reality in modern dentistry

By Jane Vorster

of dentists use new technology to diagnose problems. Many use computers to take digital x-rays which are not only quicker and more efficient but release 10 to 20 times less radiation per exposure than conventional x-rays.

But even with digital x-rays a cavity needs to have eaten through three to four millimetres of enamel before being visible. Many dentists also use laser diagnostic tools which are able to pinpoint early decay.

And even if you do have a big cavity, drilling the infected area of the tooth may not be necessary – even if the hole is several millimetres deep.

This is where ozone treatment comes in. Your dentist can use a hi-tech device to deliver a 20- to 60-second blast of ozone to kill the bacteria around your tooth.

Ozone can be toxic if it enters your lungs but in this procedure it doesn't pose any risk because the equipment forms an airtight protective cap around the tooth, ensuring none leaks into your mouth.

You won't taste or smell the ozone. The procedure is painless, removing