

Silence of the drills

Pomona dentist touts laser therapy as wave of future

Jane Lerner
The Journal News

POMONA — Stephen Welle settled into the dentist's chair, donned a pair of sunglasses and braced for the dreaded whine of the drill.

It never came.

Instead, all he heard was the soft tapping noise of a laser that blasted away decay in four teeth — all without anesthesia.

His dentist, Robert Tracey, is one of a growing number of practitioners using lasers to perform routine care, such as removing tooth decay and cutting gums.

"It's like waving a magic wand," said Tracey, as he aimed the device into Welle's mouth Wednesday. "There are a lot of advantages to using a laser from a dental point of view."

Tracey has been substituting the laser for a drill for nearly two years.

He will speak about its use next month at a seminar on laser dentistry in New Jersey.

There are several different dental lasers on the market.

The kind Tracey uses works by shining a powerful beam through a fiber-optic cable connected to a hand piece that looks like a regular dentist's drill. The beam energizes a spray of water droplets, which blasts the surface and scours away diseased or decayed tissue.

"Without touching the tooth, we can cut it clean of decay," Tracey said.

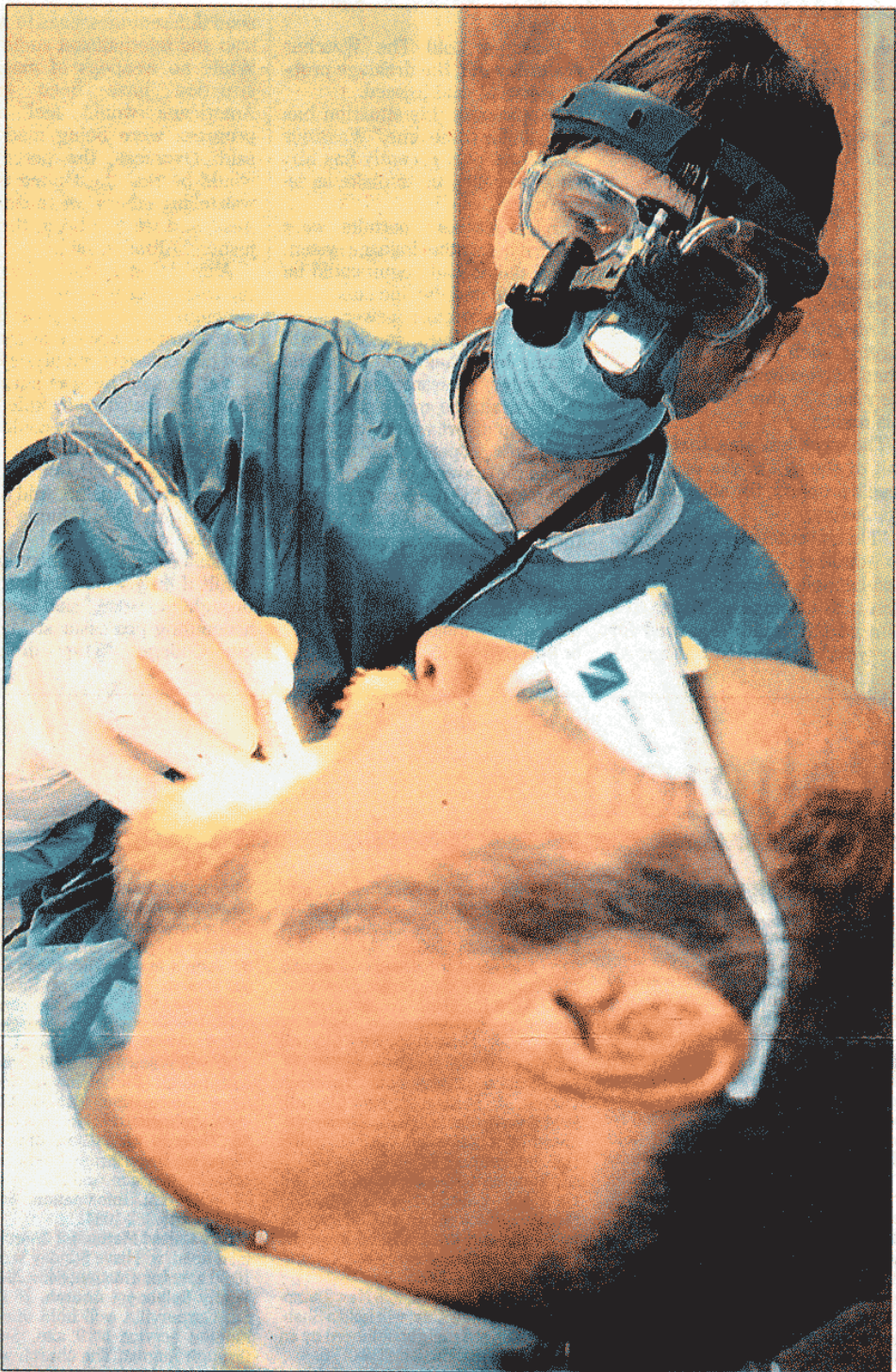
"It's safer to use. With a sharp drill, you have to be careful that the person doesn't flinch or you can cut the tongue," he said. "The laser is safer."

The device causes little pain, eliminating the need for an anesthetic. And because no Novocaine is needed, the dentist can work on more than one tooth at a time.

"I like it because I don't have to come back," said Welle, a Harriman resident, after Tracey drilled holes and filled cavities in four of his teeth. "It's quicker."

The procedure didn't hurt, he said.

Using lasers eliminates the



Robert F. Rodriguez/The Journal News
Dr. Robert Tracey uses a dental laser on Stephen Welle of Harriman. The Waterlase dental laser combines a spray of atomized water with laser energy to remove tissue and tooth decay.

risk of creating tiny cracks in teeth from drills, Tracey said.

The public is becoming more comfortable with laser technology, said Jim Naugle, spokesman for the Laser Institute of America, a nonprofit organization that fosters the use of the devices and educates the public about lasers and laser safety.

Use of lasers in dentistry is on the rise, Naugle said.

"Eventually," he said, "I see 90 percent of dentists using it."

But lasers are still relatively rare in the dentist's office, perhaps because of their cost. The

kind Tracey uses costs \$50,000. He believes he is the only dentist in Rockland who uses the device.

Less than 4 percent of more than 7,500 dentists surveyed by the American Dental Association in 2000 used lasers.

In a recent position paper on lasers, the association stated that it "considers these products to be useful for the removal of initial tooth decay and preparation of cavities in small- to moderate-sized lesions in adult patients."

The ADA is "cautiously opti-

mistic that future research will demonstrate that these laser systems may prove useful for other restorative procedures."

Longtime Spring Valley dentist Willie Bryant said he had never used a laser, but was interested in learning more about them.

"It could probably be one of the many tools we use," Bryant said. "Time will tell exactly where it takes us."

Reach Jane Lerner at jlerner@thejournalnews.com or 845-578-2458.