

Surprising Trends in Laser Usage

By Roger P. Levin, DDS

INTRODUCTION

Lasers are an excellent instrument for everyday dentistry. This statement may surprise many dentists. But a recent study indicates that highly successful practitioners are using lasers for common dental procedures, including caries treatment and restorations. Research conducted by Levin Group found that general dentists who use lasers for routine care could create a better patient experience and increase practice production, the ideal combination from a practice-management perspective. Higher case acceptance resulting from happier patients was not the only important benefit reported by dentists using the laser to perform everyday dentistry. In the same study, doctors attribute robust production growth in part to adding a laser to their standard tray. Everyday dentistry, such as the treatment of caries (even Class V composite restorations), is successfully and effectively performed, often in less time, with the use of lasers. "I use the laser with every patient that I see on my schedule," said one research participant. Another dentist said, "Integrating the laser into our practice has increased production between \$12,500 and \$15,000 per month."

GROWING THE PRACTICE

Lasers increase production of common dental procedures. While most dentists have struggled during the economic slowdown, many practices with lasers have actually grown during this period. The research indicates that dentists who own lasers are achieving production gains, not by adding complex or "exotic" treatment, but by more efficiently treating the conditions

that present most frequently in the practice, such as caries and damaged/broken teeth. These successful dentists are seeing more new patients coming into their practices and accepting treatment. One dentist said, "New patients travel long distances to come to my practice because my patients have told them about how much easier dental treatment is with my laser." Practices have also attracted new patients with advertisements that offer "an alternative to needles and drills." Patients who responded to this message told doctors that they appreciated not only a way to avoid injections and drillings, but also that these dentists stood out as progressive and patient-friendly. By letting consumers know about options for their dental care, these doctors attracted new patients to their practices. The key to practice growth is not only bringing patients into the practice but also offering treatment they will accept. Lasers, according to our interviews, were extremely helpful as a means to increase case acceptance. Some doctors actually demonstrate for patients by aiming the activated yet harmless water stream into a patient's hand from a few inches away. For patients who delay or avoid dental treatment due to anxiety, this kind of instrument is reassuring and makes them comfortable with the doctor's recommendations. "Patients are just more at ease when we use the laser," said a dentist who lives in the northwest. "Some of them have already researched the idea before they come in."

A BETTER PATIENT EXPERIENCE

Lasers reduce dental anxiety and improve the overall patient experience. When used



Roger P. Levin, DDS, is founder and CEO of Levin Group, Inc. Reach Levin Group at (888) 973-0000, or at www.levingroup.com.

appropriately, lasers greatly decrease the need for anesthetics and drilling, the two leading causes of dental anxiety. Satisfied patients are the goal for every dental practice. A dental experience that exceeds expectations will motivate patients to keep appointments, accept recommended care, and refer their friends, neighbors, and family members. The idea of dentistry is often connected to pain or discomfort in the minds of many patients. Practices that remove this connection through the use of appropriate technology will be the offices that increase patient referrals and case acceptance. Changing someone's mind can be a transformative experience. When dentists are able to help patients overcome their dental anxiety, these individuals often become the practice's biggest advocates. When asked about the connection between patient referrals and laser use, one California dentist said, "We get lots of new patients that way." Another laser user related this experience: "I had seen one of my patients before his golf game. I had restored Class V caries on Nos. 20 and 21 using the laser with no anesthetic. He was so impressed that he told all his friends he played golf with that day, and they told their wives." A few days later, when the dentist was playing a round at the same course, he was inundated with inquiries. "In the

continued on next page ➔

Surprising Trends in Laser Usage

continued

span of 15 minutes, I had five patients and four nonpatients (who after talking to me wanted to become patients) ask me if it was true that I treated their friend using a laser and no anesthetic." Summing up, the dentist said, "Do not underestimate the power of the laser, especially when a patient experiences it for the first time."

EASE OF USE

Lasers are easy to implement into the practice's daily regimen. What was reassuring to dentists when they bought the laser was how quickly the device could be incorporated into the practice. Handling a laser, dentists told us, feels very similar to having a drill in their hand. With appropriate training, the doctors were soon performing laser treatment on their patients. "I felt it was relatively easy to use the laser," said a dentist on the West Coast. "After basic training, I felt comfortable performing basic operative and soft-tissue procedures." Another doctor commented, "It's not much different than using a handpiece." Although dentists with lasers report that they "would not work without them," they also said that they would not give up their drills or the use of local anesthetic. Doctors said that lasers made dentistry "much easier," but that they were "still just another tool on the tray." Rather than replacing their drills, doctors have identified what lasers do best and use them in conjunction with other instruments. Many laser owners have grown their practices during the recession. By their calculations, these dentists said it was possible to pay for a laser based on adding only a few more new patients per month. After counting

the gains from increased patient referrals, more new patients from advertising, more hygiene production, and higher case acceptance, these doctors said they were very pleased with their investment. "Without a laser today, you're not as up-to-date as people expect," said a dentist in the Northwest.

CONCLUSION

Many dentists mistakenly think lasers are just an adjunct for high-end procedures. Levin Group research found that dentists who made lasers a standard part of their armamentarium were able to derive the most benefit from this technology. The frequent use of a laser by offices resulted in a higher level of patient comfort, increased case acceptance for routine care, larger cases, and improved doctor productivity. "Without needing anesthesia, I can take care of eight to 10 cavities at a time anywhere in the mouth," said a research participant. "For a small to medium cavity, I've done the procedure in the time I would have been waiting for the anesthesia to take effect." Laser popularity has grown steadily during the last decade, as more dentists became aware of the benefits that laser technology brings to their practices. Once solely the province of high-tech practices, lasers are now widely viewed as just another instrument on the tray by many dentists. In addition, as dentists enhance their clinical skills and offer new treatments in their practices, lasers can easily be used for a variety of procedures, including periodontal, endodontic, and surgical treatment. With the economy expected to improve this year, many consumers who postponed dental treatment during the

recession will be looking to resume regular dental care. Practices that offer compassionate care using advanced technologies such as lasers will be the offices that experience the largest influx of new patients. A California doctor captured the sentiments of many research participants about lasers' importance: "It is a friendly instrument both for me and the patients."

Editor's Note: References available upon request.

For more on this topic, go to www.dentaleconomics.com and search using the following key words: *trends in laser usage, everyday dentistry, case acceptance, Dr. Roger P. Levin.*