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Laser allows for painless root canal

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By Zillah Bahar

(IDG) -- Few people relish going to the dentist. But for Maridee Sellarole of Valencia, Calif., the very thought of making an appointment caused trepidation. "Every time you'd say 'dentist,' I'd cringe," the 47-year-old homemaker recalls.

Protracted pain was the association: Two years ago, Sellarole underwent a painful bout with traditional root canal surgery, required to treat the infection of a tooth's nerve. In the standard procedure, the tooth is hollowed with a drill, its nerve amputated, and the tooth filled and sealed. "I remember leaving (the dentist's office) with my mouth full of cotton," Sellarole says. "My mouth was totally numb. I had to be driven home, and I couldn't eat right away." Soup was the only item on her menu for two days.

When Sellarole learned she needed the procedure again last month, she opted for a new alternative laser treatment developed by dentist Richard Hansen, who directs the Center for Advanced Dentistry in Fullerton, Calif. The treatment, which can address all but the most severe root canal cases, uses a laser to vaporize infected tissue, preserving the living portion of the nerve and saving the patient from much of the pain associated with the traditional procedure, which is performed approximately 20 million times a year.

Despite its advantages, the treatment is catching on slowly among dentists, in part because the surgical tools cost \$50,000 or more.

Although the new treatment isn't typically covered by dental insurance, the price tag hasn't turned out to be a complete turnoff. About 600 of Hansen's patients have paid \$500 and \$1,000 in out-of-pocket costs for the new Food and Drug Administration-

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approved procedure, compared with \$1,000 and \$1,500 for conventional root canal surgery that's covered by insurance.

Hansen gave Sellarole a local anesthetic before he started the laser work, and when he was finished 90 minutes later, the numbing had worn off. "I drove myself home with my three kids," Sellarole recalls, adding that she had a BLT sandwich for lunch that afternoon.

To perform the root canal surgery, Hansen uses a laser called the Waterlase designed by San Clemente, Calif.-based maker of medical products Biolase Technology. William Vitale, director of clinical education for Biolase, says the laser crystal - comprised of the elements Yttrium, Scandium, Gallium and Garnet in combination with Erbium and Chromium - is specifically designed to remove decay. Patients benefit, he adds, because the laser tool reduces the incidence of swelling and bleeding, as well as the need for sutures.

Many patients, however, will have a tough time finding a dentist trained to perform the alternative surgery. Dr. Harold Goodis, a professor of dentistry at the University of California at San Francisco, thinks using a laser to save a nerve is a legitimate application of the technology but notes that dentists are in no rush to learn how to use the tool. Indeed, Hansen has trained just 20 other dentists to perform the surgery, and Vitale says most of them lease the equipment instead of buying it outright.

Goodis says the number of dentists investing in laser technology is likely to grow faster with the availability of surgical tools with multiple wavelengths, which would enable dentists to perform other procedures in addition to root canal and filling cavities. Still, Goodis says he has no doubt that the FDA ultimately will approve the use of lasers in a wide variety of dental procedures. "Lasers are here to stay," he says. "It's the wave of the future."

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