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Fighting a fear of the dentist

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Dr. Harvey Levy, a dentist who maintains a private practice on Thomas Johnson Drive, holds a mask that delivers nitrous oxide to apprehensive patients. Once a week, Dr. Levy performs dental work with general anesthesia at Frederick Memorial Hospital for those who are handicapped or have dental phobia.

Travis Pratt

FREDERICK A trip to the dentist can bring even the bravest to their knees. Memories of childhood traumas re-emerge, patients feel an overwhelming loss of control, and fear of needles can be unbearable.

For those whose anxiety deters them from seeking dental care, a Frederick dentist offers a last resort treatment option: dental work while you sleep.

Dr. Harvey Levy, who has practiced in Frederick for more than 25 years, believes dental work under general anesthesia in a hospital is a necessary solution for many people.

Many dental-phobes come to Dr. Levy's office after their teeth are severely decayed, which means the patient might have to undergo several procedures to fix the problems. For those with anxiety, sitting for multiple sessions is not an option.

"In the operating room, we wipe the slate clean," Dr. Levy said. While patients are under general anesthesia, all procedures can be performed at once. Also, dental procedures in the operating room are four times faster than in the traditional dental office, he said, as more people can work on a patient at once.

While oral surgeons regularly perform surgery on the mouth, teeth, jaws and face, as a dentist, Dr. Levy does not.

Nicole Owens didn't develop dental anxiety until she was 20 years old, when, despite efforts to numb her, she said she felt the pain of a drill during a root canal.

At a subsequent dental appointment, it happened again. Though she had been numbed with an injection and relaxed with nitrous oxide, her dentist struck a nerve in her front tooth.

"I'd rather have labor pains than go to the dentist," said Ms. Owens, a mother of two. "I think it's that drilling, that scraping, that grinding, that sanding ew! I don't like it."

Such anxiety prevents many from darkening their dentist's doorway until it's an emergency. About 50 percent of Americans do not seek routine dental treatment, according to a November 2002 article from the Academy of General Dentistry.

Ms. Owens didn't go to the dentist for several years after her bad experiences, which lead to major tooth decay. When pain finally brought her to Dr. Levy's office in the fall of 2004, she needed to have four cavities filled, a crown and an extraction, she said.

After Dr. Levy examined her and assessed her anxiety response, which includes rapid heartbeat and crying, he suggested she could have the work performed under general anesthesia.

Ms. Owens agreed, though not without apprehension.

"I was scared in the operating room that I'd feel the pain and it would wake me up from my sleep," she said. "(But) the next thing you know, they were telling me to wake up."

Last resort

Since opening his Frederick practice in 1980, Dr. Levy has seen roughly 1,000 people in the operating room at Frederick Memorial Hospital.

"They're afraid, because they don't know what is happening to them. It's the fear of the unknown," he said. "They don't realize we're trying to help them."

Some mentally disabled patients become fearful and violent, Dr. Levy said, so hospital treatment is safest for both patient and staff. With the patient under general anesthesia, the dentist is able to identify and treat any dental problem, many of which can spell serious complications down the road.

About a quarter of the patients he sees in the operating room have serious dental phobias, he said. Taking otherwise healthy patients to the operating room is a last resort.

Dr. Levy first tries to examine patients using relaxation techniques, he said. Each of his rooms is equipped with a television that can play movies or music.

He also assesses how well patients tolerate dental work using traditional techniques, such as nitrous oxide or numbing agents, he said. Some patients take Valium before a visit.

"Everything we do is to reduce patient anxiety," Dr. Levy said. "If we fail then and only then can we justify the cost and anesthetic risk of going to the operating room."

Dr. Levy occasionally treats very young children in a hospital. Many children refuse to let dentists examine their mouths and are too young to understand why it is necessary, he said. Their tooth decay leads to pain and complications.

Rather than risk traumatic memories by restraining fearful children, Dr. Levy said he prefers to treat dental decay while a child sleeps, so the child won't develop a dental phobia.

By "wiping the slate clean," he said, the child can return to the dentist's office for simple procedures and have a positive first experience.

Filling void

Dr. Levy is performing a much-needed service, said Dr. Bart Johnson, president of the American Association of Hospital Dentists.

Few dentists who maintain private practices perform hospital dentistry, Dr. Johnson said, because the field is not profitable. His organization is a fair representation of the number of hospital dentists in the nation, he said. AAHD members include 400 hospital dentists and 200 hospital hygienists.

More than 173,500 dentists have a private practice, according to a 2003 American Dental Association Survey Center report.

Several problems face the hospital dentistry industry, Dr. Johnson said. The largest population needing the service are the mentally disabled and Alzheimer's patients, many of whom are on Medicare, he said.

However, Medicare has a poor reimbursement rate to doctors anywhere from 30 percent to 40 percent of costs, he said.

"And when you consider your operating costs are 50 to 60 percent, any time you go into the OR, you're donating your time," Dr. Johnson said. "Just getting some sort of payment for services is a huge difficulty sometimes."

Because of the low reimbursement, hospitals are disinclined to provide dentists operating room time.

And with medical advances keeping people alive longer, particularly the mentally handicapped, hospital dentists struggle to accommodate those who require their services.

"The need is growing exponentially, and we're being totally flat in meeting it," Dr. Johnson said.

The cost of dental work in the hospital is prohibitive for most people without insurance, he explained; hospitals charge anywhere from \$2,000 to \$6,000 per visit. Ideally, the dental portion is covered by one's dental insurance, and the cost of anesthesia, recovery room and operating room are covered by medical insurance.

But Dr. Levy said that's easier said than done. To convince insurers to cover the treatment, he has to write letters of medical necessity explaining the patient has situational anxiety or dental phobia that can ultimately compromise their health.

"Most of the time (it works), but not always," he said.

Gaining ground?

Dentists who want to perform hospital dentistry must undergo advanced training, usually a one-to two-year program called general practice residency. Roughly 2,000 positions are annually available nationwide, Dr. Levy said.

After Dr. Levy finished dental school in 1974, he did a two year-residency in hospital dentistry. He then became clinical director of general practice residency at the University of Pennsylvania, he said.

He now balances hospital dentistry with maintaining a private practice with two associates and several hygienists.

Dr. Levy said maintaining a private practice while performing hospital dentistry is the best of both worlds. By operating a general dentistry practice, he is able to afford to do the less-profitable hospital cases.

"Some things you do for bread and butter, and some things you do because you enjoy it and it's your passion," he said.

Recently, Ms. Owens sat in Dr. Levy's office for a tooth filling. Though she still gets nervous before a dental visit, the process is getting easier, she said. After her appointment a few weeks ago, she bragged to her co-workers about her success in the chair.

Dr. Levy said seeing people overcome their fears is one of his goals.

"That's my greatest sense of satisfaction," he said.