

No More Drills?

Upon questioning patients, the sound and vibration of our dental handpieces (drills) are almost universally regarded as a negative experience. In other words, everyone hates the drill. Even our cutting edge electric handpieces (as opposed to the old whistling air powered handpieces) can still send shivers down one's spine. That very whistling sound is also a major cause of hearing loss for many dentists. I'm sure all those years of twelve gauge, .270 Winchester, and nine millimeter blasts had nothing to do with my audio acuity. Yes, my hearing (or lack of) can probably be blamed on my occupation...as well as my years of hunting.

Recently, I read an article on "the future of dentistry," that stated that the dental drill will soon be a thing of the past. For those of you who do not regularly read dental literature, this claim arises at least once every few years. So far, during my career, air abrasion (imagine sandblasting cavities away) and lasers have both claimed to be the answer to "no more drills." While both lasers and air abrasion have many great dental uses, neither has supplanted the precision, safety, ease of use, and power of the dental handpiece...yet.

Interestingly enough, there is a new technology coming down the line that may revolutionize removing decay from teeth...or not. Plasma cutting technology claims to be able to remove decayed tooth structure without all the vibration and noise of the dental handpiece. Imagine a miniature welder's cutting torch that doesn't get hot, but removes unhealthy tooth structure. If it comes to fruition, it could revolutionize dentistry. There are even some who theorize that teeth can be cut at body temperature with no anesthesia. In other words: no shot and no drill. That would be welcome technology to us all.

Unfortunately, plasma technology appears to have a ways to go. Any medical procedure must be thoroughly researched before it can be used on patients. If plasma cutting technology does work well, it would probably take a few years to catch on and overcome the old standby dental drill. The good news is that the technology is already in use in other professions and the cost is predicted to be much less than other emerging dental modalities. Maybe someday soon, we can all have a pleasant day at the dental office.

Until next time, keep smiling.

-Comments can be sent to Drs. Parrish through their website at www.ParrishDental.com.