

## Laser dentistry shines on Fall River, but not RI

By [David Ortiz](#)



[Checking a patient's mouth is Christopher Walinski.](#)

Christopher Walinski, a dentist in Fall River, wonders if there is such a thing as having a market too cornered.

In the year since he became the only dentist in all of Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts who uses a laser instead of a drill for many procedures, Walinski can't keep

up with the demand on his practice. He routinely gets calls and e-mails from patients in other states – and even other countries – asking to schedule an appointment.

"I got a call from a serviceman in Korea who lives in upstate New York, wanting to schedule an appointment for some time after he gets home. I referred him to a laser dentist in New York State. I got an e-mail from a woman in Puerto Rico, who wanted to fly up to see me. I gave her the names of some laser dentists in Florida," said Walinski, the sole practitioner at Dentistry in the Highlands, on Robeson Street in Fall River.

Word has been spreading about new, remarkably painless laser dental procedures since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved lasers that remove tooth decay in 1997, and last year gave the go-ahead to laser treatments for root canals. Today nearly 1,000 U.S. dentists use lasers, according to a July report in the Wall Street Journal. Laser dentistry has also been written about recently in Discover Magazine and USA Today.

Dentists who use the new laser equipment make oral incisions or remove the decay from a tooth essentially by vaporizing it with a stream of painless laser light or ionized water molecules. The laser procedures are precise, sterile and perhaps less damaging to teeth than old-fashioned dental hand-drills. With laser procedures bleeding is minimized, swelling is controlled, and there is usually little, if any, postoperative discomfort. Doctors who use the equipment make novocaine almost obsolete for many of their patients.

Many dentists report that the quiet lasers are particularly useful for treating children, who willingly sit in their chairs knowing there will be no painful needle or uncomfortable numbness involved in the ordeal.

Walinski said he spent months reading skeptically about new dental laser equipment that reportedly reduced pain to a tiny prickly- or pressure-sensation. Then, lured by the possible upside, he sampled the Waterlase system, made by Biolase Technology of San Clemente, California, the largest manufacturer of dental lasers in the U.S.

"I just got curious, because I've always been interested in high-tech stuff, and I buy all the gadgets," Walinski recalled. "But this one just blew me away; I couldn't believe what I saw. For the first time, a product that actually does what it says."

Walinski said he signed a three-year lease of the Waterlase laser for \$49,500, then got certified to use the product. The laser, and another Biolase dental laser that bleaches teeth, have quickly become integral to his practice, he said.

"Daily, I probably use my laser more than I use my dental drill now. I've tried to quantify what the lasers have done for my business and it's difficult to quantify, but it's definitely increased revenues.

Because Walinski doesn't have to anesthetize most patients when using the laser, he is able to see more patients in a day. He said he routinely fills cavities on both sides of a patient's mouth during a routine checkup without having to schedule another appointment. And Walinski said his referrals have shot way up – more people are likely to go to the dentist whose work is so quick and painless, he said.

"A couple of years ago, I would have laughed if someone said I would be able to perform gum surgery without novocaine and hardly any bleeding. It just blew me away when I started doing it myself," said Walinski. "I can't see the patients that are calling in any more because it's gotten out of hand. Somebody else has got to get in on this because I can't do it all anymore, if I'm the only one."

And yet, he is the only laser dentist in the area. In fact, there is not a single laser dentist in Rhode Island. Biolace's sales representative for Rhode Island and Massachusetts is Duane Staley.

"We've got doctors on all sides of them embracing this technology. We really need to have doctors in Rhode Island step up to the plate and upgrade their practices," said Staley.

Which begs the question: Why are dentists here seemingly passing up on a product that could jumpstart their practice?

"It's something we shake our heads at all the time. Why are you sending your business out of state? The ones that do use it, it literally changes the way they practice dentistry," said Harvey Miller, a Biolase spokesman.

There are several likely reasons, said Walinski, Miller and Staley: The steep cost and poor quality of the first dental lasers, sold in the early 1990s, have left many dentists skeptical. Many dentists who have small practices believe the cost of the laser equipment – around \$50,000 – makes them a bad investment now, and they are waiting for the price to come down.

The standard high-speed hand-drill typically sells for around \$600.

"Dentists don't get a lot of business training. As a group we tend to look more at what something's cost is as opposed to what it will do for you," said Walinski.

And many old-school dentists have been slow to give up the drill they are used to working with. Others may have been turned off by the aggressive marketing and relentless stock promotion of some dental laser manufacturers.

Finally, some dentists remain concerned about the risk of the laser over-heating and damaging the tooth. While dentists and laser manufacturers say they are safe, the equipment still has one major shortcoming – lasers can't be used to remove silver or other metal fillings.

Nevertheless, the number of dentists using lasers is expected to increase sharply over the next few years. One indicator may be the steady progression in bottom line performance and sustained profitability and growth of the two companies that manufacture and market the lasers: Biolace, and Premier Laser Systems Inc., of Irvine, California.

For his part, Walinski predicts that lasers will do for the dental industry what they did for the eyecare industry in the 1990s.

"I've been getting a lot of inquiries from Rhode Island. This just tells me that they want it, they're looking for it, and they can't find it so they're getting frustrated," said Walinski. "Right now it's going slowly, but its my gut feeling is that it will revolutionize dentistry."

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