In June 2011, I was having lunch at home when I suddenly bit the inside of my cheek on the right side. The yelp of pain I emitted startled my dog enough he got up from where he was lying to check if I had dropped any food to the floor in my distress (he was unlucky).

A bump arose where I had bit my cheek, and during the course of the next nine months, the bump not only seemed to be constantly in my way, but also became a distraction. No matter how careful I was, the tall conical bump found its way between my teeth a few more times during mealtimes. In addition, I’d probe it with my tongue and even chew on it in moments of contemplation. I kept waiting for it to disappear, but I knew it wouldn’t on its own.

During a routine checkup, my dentist kindly offered to get rid of the bump for me. When I asked her how, and the words “cut it off” were part of her response, I had to stop myself from curling my lips over my teeth and clamping my jaws shut in response. “Cut? Bloody open wound? Thanks, but no thanks,” I replied.

I’m no stranger to dental procedures and not afraid of a needle, but the thought of her excising this annoying bump with a scalpel was definitely not a welcoming thought. I knew there had to be a less painful way, and to me that meant using a laser. I’ve worked in dental publishing for nearly 10 years, so Biolase lasers are familiar to me, but I’ve never seen one in action for a real procedure. Thus, I offered myself as a willing patient, with pen in hand, if Biolase would help me find a local dentist to do the procedure.

Enter Dr. Sharad Pandhi, a Tucson, Ariz., dentist with more than 25 years of experience who has been recognized locally for the two days each week he spends providing treatment to patients in nursing homes and other care facilities as well as home-bound patients. Pandhi is trained to treat special-needs patients with physical or developmental disabilities. In April 2010, he was interviewed on local TV station KVOA News 4 about a laser root canal treatment he performed on a patient with sensitive teeth and considerable fear of the dentist. I, however, was unaware of all this before I met Pandhi on a Saturday morning in March at a laser dentistry lecture by Bruce Cassis, DDS, sponsored by Biolase (Fig. 1).

Cassis gives one the impression that he could explain even quantum physics in his gentle Southern accent such that anyone would understand. This and his calm demeanor are traits I am certain his patients benefit greatly from. Pandhi projects a great sense of peace and immediately engenders one’s trust, which makes him equally well appointed as a dentist. He and I scheduled a preliminary appointment for him to assess the bump and plan its removal a few days later.

On the fibroma removal day, I was scheduled as a guest lecturer in the law department at the University of Arizona in the afternoon. Sitting in Pandhi’s chair, I asked if I would be able to speak normally in six hours and he assured me I would. As Pandhi and his staff prepared me for the procedure, I found that I kept...
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reminding myself that this was not going to hurt and was likely going to be less of an uncomfortable experience than the replacement of some fillings recently by my regular dentist. I recalled the conversation I had with Pandhi when he answered my question, “So why doesn’t it hurt when you use lasers for these types of procedures?” He explained how the stimulus for a nerve to feel pain is 150 microseconds in length and that his laser uses short pulses from 5 to 50 microseconds in length, depending upon the setting he chooses. These short pulses have an analgesic effect. The Waterlase YSGG laser is an air and water handpiece that actually excites the water molecules within the spray and in the target tissue. Thus, the result is micro-ablation of tooth structure, bone or, as in my case, soft tissue.

After administering a shot of local anesthetic, Pandhi and his team proceeded to photographically document the laser procedure from start to finish (Figs. 2–4). Much credit goes to him and his team for achieving my request of getting an image of Pandhi using the Waterlase on the fibroma. Despite his kind warning that he was ready to apply the laser, a small kernel of doubt remained that I had to tamp down in private.

“This is not going to hurt, do not worry. Lasers are cool in every sense of the word,” I told myself. My only sensation was that of my mouth being kept open and the gentle tug on the inside of my cheek where Pandhi held the fibroma out for removal. There was no pain. There was, however, a frisson of pleasure as Pandhi showed me the contents of the sample tube he would send to the lab for diagnosis: “Bye-bye fibroma!”

I dutifully kept pressure on the site for 30 minutes after the procedure with the gauze Pandhi provided me, and truth be told, that is about the only time I noticed the removal site until my follow-up appointment one week later (Fig. 5). Of course, I scrutinized it in the mirror the moment I got home, and marveled at its bloodless and painless condition. The loss of the fibroma was so simple and aggravation free — no collateral numbness, pain free — that I simply forgot to pick up the chlorhexidine rinse Pandhi had prescribed, so I didn’t rinse twice a day with this as instructed.

Six hours later, I was lecturing a group of senior law students about how to write and edit documents and organize their files. I had no awareness of the tiny depression in my check left by the removal of the fibroma beyond the fact that it was no longer there to nudge with my tongue as a colleague introduced me to the class.

I’ve always thought lasers were cool (pun intended), but now I know from personal experience. In my opinion, any clinician offering laser dentistry should be shouting this in his or her waiting room 24/7, so to speak.

References

1. www.smileperfectionaz.com
2. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2wHXY0d2oY
3. The laboratory report noted the following: “Comment: There is subepithelial expansion by dense fibrous tissue, rich in fibroblasts. Gross: Received in formalin, a fragment of pink-tan mucosal soft tissue measuring 0.6 x 0.5 x 0.2 cm. Clinical: Fibroma.”
For more information, please visit www.biolase.com. Also, check out the offerings of the World Clinical Laser Institute (WCLI), which recently held a Super Symposium in San Diego. This laser organization is more than 2,000 members strong and provides education and fellowship at major symposiums in the eastern and western United States every year, as well as numerous local and regional symposiums and seminars in the United States and other countries. More information about WCLI is available at www.learnlasers.com.