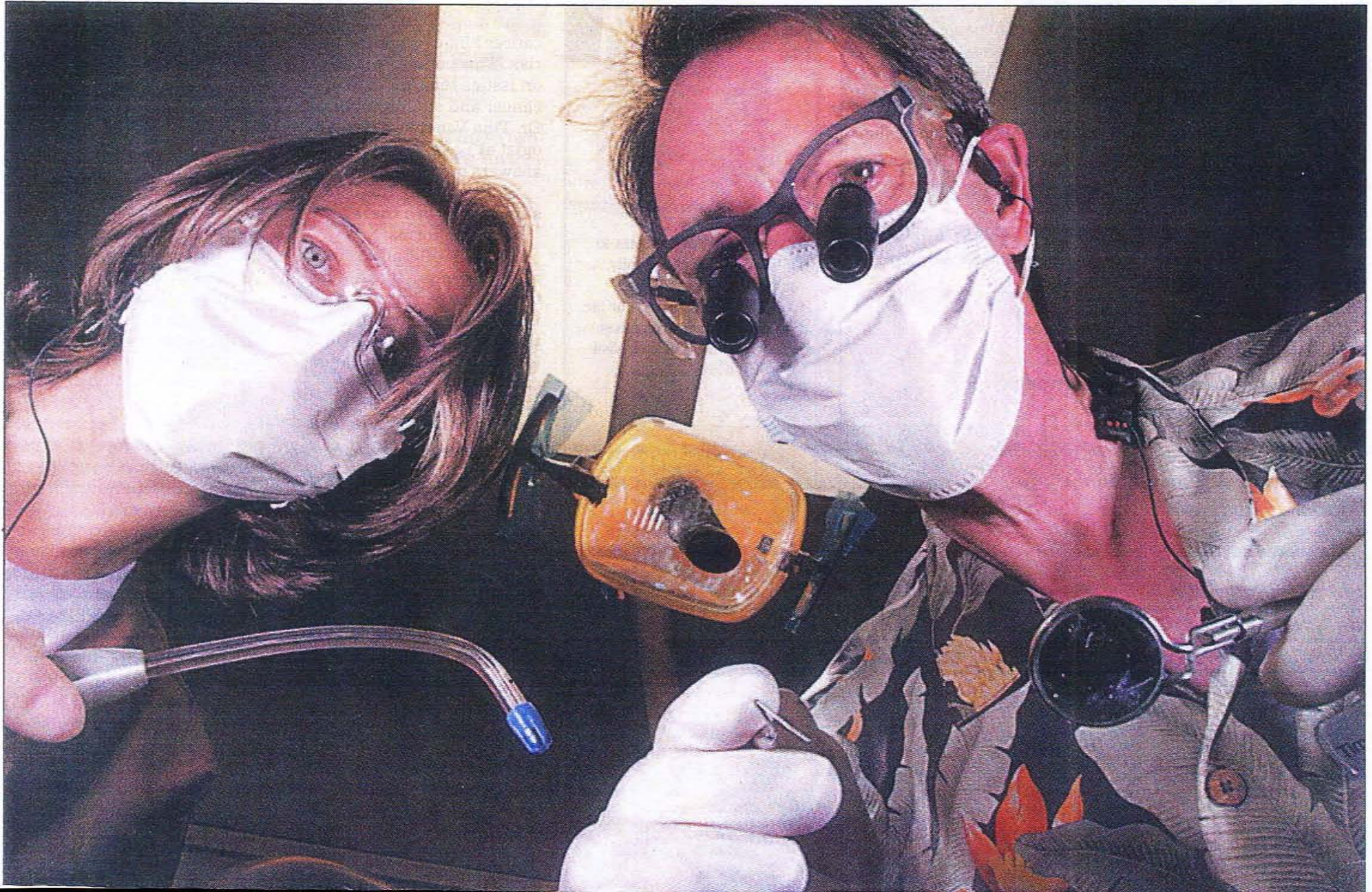


Health & Family

A11

New approaches and procedures are helping patients overcome their fear of visiting the dentist. Local specialists hope this is the end of the ...



Nightmare in the chair

By STEPHANIE FOSNIGHT | STAFF WRITER
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If you're scared of the dentist, you're not alone.

Tim Dotson, proprietor of Perfect Smile Dental Spa in Roscoe Village, is with you. He hates having his teeth worked on.

"I have to be knocked out," Dotson said. Some might expect that, being a dentist himself, he'd have overcome his phobia long ago.

Nope.

"I know what's coming," Dotson explained. "And where they could mess up."

Driven by pain

At least 5 percent of people in Western countries put off

needed dental care because of dental phobias, according to dentalphobiacentral.org, though that's a conservative estimate. Whatever the precise numbers, Dotson sees plenty of people who wait until the last possible moment before making an appointment.

"People who are phobic come in when they're finally driven by pain to the point where they can't stand it anymore," he said.

However, the spa dentistry field Dotson that helped pioneer is making inroads against this persistent fear, as are a host of new minimally invasive dentistry techniques.

Dentist Brian Danielewicz, who practices in Libertyville and Antioch, said he sees fewer

People who are phobic come in when they're finally driven by pain to the point where they can't stand it anymore.

and fewer people who are afraid of the dentist.

"Most of the people who have dental phobias are probably middle-aged or older folks," he said, since they're the ones who remember "scary" dental procedures of the past. "Now, when the kids are afraid, that's because somebody has put ideas in their heads."

Outdoing Oprah

Dotson hates to admit it, but he has to credit Chicago's most

famous talk-show host for sparking his own personal "Aha!" moment — one that helped inspire Perfect Smile.

One day during his dental school years, his wife Sue had the television tuned to "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

"Oprah was talking to a couple of dentists who were using Walkmans for their patients," Dotson said. "I thought, 'That's lame. I'm going to go so far beyond that.'"

So when he opened his dream practice five years ago, he included everything he could think of to relieve patient anxiety. All patients receive a complimentary massage before appointments and there are other free services like paraffin wax hand treatments, head-

phones for music or television, and 3-D glasses for watching movies.

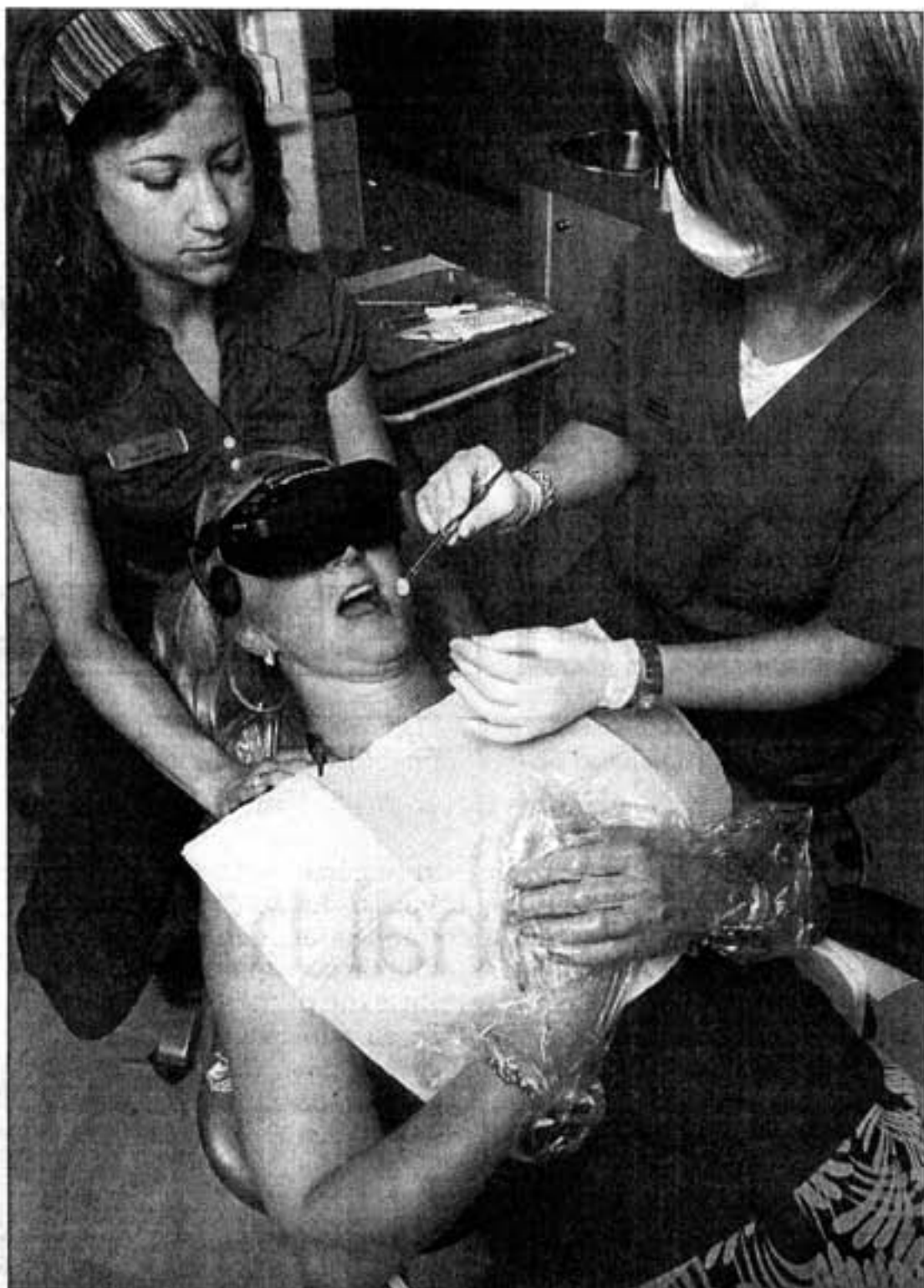
'Act of courage'

"We bake bread there to overcome the typical dental office smell," said Dotson, who is also certified to perform dental techniques on patients who are under light sedation, so they can be out during complicated work.

One of the most effective draws, though, he said, is the free scented laughing gas offered to all patients. Laughing gas creates a temporary altered mental state but is excreted when patients exhale, so they can still drive home afterwards.

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Sue Dotson (in chair), Perfect Smile Dental Spa office manager and wife of dentist Tim Dotson, models some of the spa services offered to dental patients: Movie glasses, a paraffin wax hand treatment, and a massage from on-staff massage therapist Lisa Rouse. At right is Samira Ramic, head dental assistant. —Jason Brown/Staff Photographer



CHAIR

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"People enjoy it enough that they're not afraid to come in and they look forward to the procedure, which is really our ultimate goal," said Dotson, who's also known for calling patients to check up after procedures and even giving them his home number.

Another tactic he takes is to make sure patients don't feel judged for their phobia. Receptionists are trained to listen carefully if people spill irrational fears.

"Every time the phone rings, it's a miracle," he said. "It's an act of courage for some people to make a call to the dental office."

Different approach

There's no masseuse at Danielewicz's dental offices.

There is, however, a pleasant, chatty atmosphere that even the most terrified children respond to, proving that a compassionate dentist goes a long way.

Libertyville resident Craig Neimeyer remembers the first time his 11-year-old son Kiley went to see "Dr. Dan." The boy, then 5, had kicked and screamed his way through a dentist appointment at a children's specialist the previous year, so Neimeyer was holding his breath.

"There was no problem. It was like a miracle," Neimeyer said. "I just think he liked Dr. Dan, and his staff was very friendly."

Laser techniques

Besides making an effort to get to know his patients and put them at ease, Danielewicz concentrates on using minimally invasive techniques, including lasers, to reduce pain.

"You don't want to make big holes in teeth anymore," he said.

One popular tool is the Waterlase, a laser that doesn't actually touch the tooth but conducts energy through a stream of water.

"The laser actually explodes water molecules to ablate the part of the tooth you're aiming at," Danielewicz said. "What most of my patients love about it is you don't have that constant whirling, whining sound of the drill."

In addition, the laser performs its own anesthetizing.

"We numb the tooth with the laser and only if we need to do we go in there and numb with the needle," he said.

No Novocain

The Waterlase, which has been approved for many common dental procedures since 1998, works without heat, vibration or pressure and reduces bleeding, post-operative pain and swelling, according to studies.

Neimeyer was happy to give the Waterlase procedure a try when he got a filling last year. He was grateful that he didn't need any Novocain to numb his mouth.

"To me, sometimes putting that needle in is worse than the other part," Neimeyer said.

Brain attached

Danielewicz also uses specialized lasers for detecting tooth decay and cosmetic procedures like whitening teeth and removing excess gum tissue.

The dental field has come a long way since his parents' days, said the 55-year-old Neimeyer.

"My dad never asked for Novocain," he said. "That's because it was never offered to him when he was younger. I can't imagine having a filling taken care of without Novocain."

In fact, Neimeyer has his own childhood memories of a dentist who would "grab you by the collar" if you didn't settle down, though he doesn't have any particular fear now.

According to Dotson, it's up to dental schools to remind aspiring dentists of the importance of patient care.

"They really do care about people, but I think it's easy to get lost in learning the procedures and forget that there's a brain attached to those teeth," he said.