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Louis R. Vita, D.D.S.
Leading in the Diagnosis and Treatment of TMJ

Louis R. Vita, D.D.S., and the Vita Head, Neck and Facial Pain Relief Center

Leading in the Diagnosis and Treatment of TMJ

By Julie Jacobs

The Vita Head, Neck and Facial Pain Relief Center, located in Clifton, receives as many as five calls a day from people looking for help to alleviate their temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders. The practice saw a staggering 265 new patients last year alone, and while founder Louis R. Vita, D.D.S., was engaged in a late Monday *Doctor of Dentistry* interview, he also was preparing for a caseload of 54 patients that next Tuesday. Such numbers, however, don't astound Vita, a noted authority in North Jersey in the field of comprehensive TMJ diagnosis and therapy.

"A lot of people have TMJ and don't even know it. Lack of pain does not indicate that a problem does not exist. That's why screening is very critical," says Vita, who typically receives patients through referrals from other dentists and ear, nose and throat specialists. "There's also a large percentage who know they have it, but have never been treated."

Vita sees patients not only from New Jersey, but Long Island,

upstate New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania as well. He's in his office six days a week, often from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. "Dentistry is my 'hobby,'" he says.

His work ethic and expertise are far from lost on his patients or his colleagues, with testimonials abounding. Among the many that are especially indicative of the impact he has made are one from a patient in Sussex.

"I was told by so many doctors that I could not be helped, but because of you I am now pain free and finally have a quality of life." Another patient in Wayne says, "I never thought I would feel better again. Until you treated me, I thought I would have to suffer for the rest of my life." Words from colleagues include, "Dr. Vita shares his knowledge with other dentists to benefit patients," and, "It is remarkable that my patients have had complete elimination of all pain and TMJ symptoms. There are many doctors doing the same

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PHOTOS BY KEN ALSWANG





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“We want to treat the source of pain, not the pain itself, which boils down to an appropriate diagnosis,” emphasizes Vita, who uses such high-tech diagnostic modalities as Doppler analysis, three-dimensional CAT scans, tekscans, and TMJ MRIs that can evaluate disc structure and the impact on bone.

type of treatment who cannot achieve this level of success.”

THE ABCs OF TMJ

TMJ problems frequently result from trauma, such as a fall, a car accident or a direct strike to the chin during physical activity. On occasion, the early loss of teeth without replacement can prompt the condition. In this instance, remaining teeth can drift, negatively affecting the bite and placing continual stress on the joint.

TMJ is prevalent among females due to the gender’s tendency toward ligament laxity and low muscle tone, and can occur at a very young age. With children, in particular, timely treatment is paramount in order to prevent improper growth that, in turn, can cause facial deformities.

Patients with TMJ may experience a range of symptoms, from clicking or popping noises while chewing, headaches and sensitive teeth to ringing in the ears, poor posture, and facial, neck and shoulder pain. Additionally, they can exhibit physical changes like swelling of the cheek muscles, tilting of the head, and fullness of the neck near the thyroid gland. Studies have shown that TMJ also can lead to osteoarthritis.

“When we observe the patient’s teeth come together, we see how the forward posturing of the mandible can also reposition the head in a forward direction. This can occur with or without the patient’s ability to adapt within their occlusion,” Vita points out. “Still, diagnosis must be specific. A patient can tell me he has TMJ, but that’s not enough for me to determine the right treatment and prognosticate. For me, it’s about developing a definitive diagnosis based on symptoms and physical and skeletal changes.”

Many patients arrive at Vita’s center in pain, as well as with

hefty doses of hopelessness and frustration after having gone from doctor to doctor in search of relief. “It’s not unusual for people to come in seeking second, third or even fourth opinions. I had two women come to see me, one from Long Island and the other from Connecticut. Each had 22 customized mouth guards, no two of which were alike and none of them working.

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The most challenging TMJ cases deal with neuropathic pain, like trigeminal neuralgia and chronic regional pain syndrome, stemming from long-term injury. For these cases, Vita collaborates with a neurologist. For the majority of his patients, however, he draws solely from his practice’s arsenal of treatments. Common nonsurgical approaches available at his center include occlusal splints to alleviate muscle tension and adjust the bite; physical therapy to help with proper movement and muscle coordination while also reducing pain; atlas orthogonal therapy to address the misalignment of the atlas bone that can contribute to headache and poor posture; and occlusal equilibration to balance the bite so the teeth can then support the jaw joint. There is also specialized muscle therapy, and pain management through medication, injections, and cold laser and radio frequency, which heals damaged tissue and reduces edema at the site of pain or injury.

Vita offers therapy for cervical spine dysfunction as well, bringing in a spine specialist two times a week to correct patients’ cervical vertebral bone alignment while he attends to their TMJ.

He notes that his is the only dental establishment in the country to combine these practices.

“I’m here to manage TMJ to optimal stability,” says Vita, who sees his patients every six or 12 months following treatment for monitoring. “A lot of surgery for TMJ should not be done. But that said, if I deem TMJ is in such a way that I know the bone level will deteriorate without surgical intervention, then surgery certainly becomes the treatment option of choice.”

According to Vita, treatment time varies from case to case, “but if you judge success by pain elimination, there should be an 80% reduction in pain within six weeks if patients follow their protocols. If not, we revisit things.”

EXTRAORDINARY TEACHER

At the Vita Head, Neck and Facial Pain Relief Center, patients can also have their general and restorative dentistry needs met. The staff of the state-of-the-art, full-service facility, which is made “homey” with its warm and welcoming decor, takes pride in respecting patients’ time and adhering to appointment schedules. Vita heads this fully trained staff that includes a receptionist, office manager, insurance coordinator, dental hygienist, lab technician, three dental assistants and a statistician. All attend continuing medical education (CME) programs to learn about dental advances and upgrade their practice techniques, ensuring that patients receive the most current diagnostic and treatment capabilities available.

Vita himself is active in providing TMJ CME to other dentists

and physicians (residents, too), speaking to study clubs and at dental society conferences. He even holds court in his office now and then, either mentoring a colleague or meeting with another dentist who is eager to learn more about TMJ and accompanies his or her patient to the center. “I so enjoy it,” says Vita of his interaction with his fellow practitioners. “I always tell the patient, ‘Here’s someone who cares about you.’”

“Some dentists know about TMJ, but there absolutely should be more training. I give lectures — those on patient profile recognition are my favorite — but because of time constraints, I have to limit myself to four or five a year.”

Education about TMJ is vital, when considering how steadily the field has evolved over the years. “In the 1980s, a lot of what we knew was based on theory. But with the advent of the MRI in ’89 and the increased study done with cadavers, we came to a better understanding about TMJ and have really changed the way we treat it,” Vita offers. “The problem that still exists is that there are many different schools of thought, and unfortunately no formal specialty or standard of care.”

Vita is looking to create that standard, as well as accurate screening methods for TMJ, with the help of his practice’s clinical and research teams. Analyzing data from the center’s own patient records and assisted by a head and neck specialists society in Atlanta, he is in the process of publishing potentially groundbreaking information. “There is no question in my mind that this investigation could provide the impetus for developing care standards for

MRI interpretation and consultation with the referring dentist and patient is an important part of the process for proper diagnosis and treatment.





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TMJ disorders,” he says with great excitement.

DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR

Vita came to be interested in TMJ at Georgetown University School of Dentistry, where he earned his degree. It quickly became his passion, motivating him to follow up his undergraduate study with a two-year program administered by the United States Dental Institute to become certified in functional jaw orthopedics and orthodontics. He attended the institute one weekend a month for the duration of the program while simultaneously doing general dentistry as an associate in Clifton. When the dentist he was working for retired, he took over part of the practice and,

with it, set about building his own. Over the ensuing years, he received the patients of other retiring colleagues and his practice grew by leaps and bounds.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Vita sought further instruction in TMJ. He was accepted at several prestigious dental institutions for advanced scholarship, including the Piper Clinic and the Dawson Center for Advanced Dental Studies, both in St. Petersburg, FL, and the L.D. Pankey Institute for Advanced Dental Studies in the Miami area. He was enrolled at Pankey in 1999, and completed several courses at Dawson, which combines TMJ and restorative dentistry education, between 1995 and 2005. It is at Piper, however, where he found the greatest opportunity



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to further his TMJ knowledge base, and where he continues to this day to go two to three times annually.

“Piper is known just for TMJ diagnosis and treatment planning. It’s the premier study center for TMJ,” Vita remarks. “Usually, there are only 10 or 20 students to a class. On occasion, I’ve even had one-on-one instruction.”

Backed by his certification in advanced TMJ disorders from Piper, Vita has become a respected member of the Trigeminal Neuralgia Association, the American Equilibration Society and the New Jersey Pankey Study Group. He also is a fellow of the Academy of General Dentistry and belongs to the New Jersey Dental Society, the New Jersey Academy of General Dentistry, the Passaic County Dental Society and the American Dental Association.

FAMILY/PRACTICE MAN

“This practice is really changing its focus, as we look to do more TMJ and less of the other dental disciplines,” says Vita, then adding, “Though we will still care for our current general and restorative patients just as we always have.”

Vita’s patients, in fact, are like an extension of his family. “They come in without appointments, and drop off food for us,” he laughs. “I’ve been to their weddings and children’s christenings. And when my father died two years ago, I was really overwhelmed by the outpouring of sentiment from them.”

His purpose in life, he says, is twofold: to take care of his family and attend to his patients. Vita learned how to give of himself

by observing his hardworking, dedicated parents, who were very service-oriented in the Garfield community where he was born and raised. He now makes his home in Totowa with his high school sweetheart wife of 25 years and their 20-year-old son.

When Vita heads to the office each morning, the sun often isn’t even up, but he’s raring to go and just thinking about the day ahead. “I get up ready to work and I want others to feel the same way. I’m blessed with a loyal staff, and I really enjoy diagnosing my patients’ problems and figuring out how to solve them. There is no other field for me. I’m lucky, because I love what I do.” ■

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