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Like father, like son - always on the cutting edge

by Cassandra Barbosa

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As a child, Dr. Paul Matrullo enjoyed clay sculpting and ceramic arts. Many in his family were doctors but, with this natural talent, he saw a better fit with dentistry.

“I see dentistry as an art form, and I’ve always been artistic and work well with my hands,” he said.

Matrullo has been straightening and fixing teeth in Cranston for 30 years now. He even expanded into cosmetic surgery, like filling in fine lines around the mouth – another aspect, he says, of sculpting a beautiful smile.

Dr. Joseph Matrullo grew up spending time at his father’s office and started doing little jobs here and there. Eventually he “apprenticed” his way in and now works alongside his father, which they both say is wonderful.

“I learn from him and he learns from me, it’s a great situation,” said Paul Matrullo.

Their dental office reflects the wide range of services they now offer – from periodontal and orthodontist work to the basics like fillings, crowns and cleanings to veneers, teeth whitening and cosmetic surgery; the waiting room resembles a hotel lobby.

“Anything that needs to be done and anything you want done, we do,” said Joseph Matrullo.

Now the father-son dental practice has recently adopted the most advanced oral cancer detection technology available. It is called the VELscope System.

According to the Matrulllos, there are approximately 31,000 cases of oral cancer every year; one in four affected will die because the cancer is often found too late.

Signs of oral cancer include pain or difficulty swallowing, a lump that can be felt inside or outside the mouth or neck, a sore or discolored area in the mouth or hoarseness that lasts for a long time.

Before the light detection method was discovered, dentists could only detect oral cancer visually or by feeling for lumps under white light. The old standard to diagnose the cancer was to look at the suspected lesion, see how long it had been there and use professional judgment.

“If something looked suspicious enough then we would proceed to a biopsy of the cancer tissue,” said Joseph Matrullo.

The VELscope system can detect cancer in much earlier stages.

The pre-cancerous stage you want to catch it in is called dysplasia. Stage 2, called basal cell carcinoma, is where it spreads to the basal cells in the mouth. Stage 3 is carcinoma-in-situ, which can be deadly and requires radiation treatment. Stage 4 is the deadliest, squamous cell carcinoma, where the cancer spreads below the stroma (the mouth's supporting tissue) and can spread into the bloodstream and travel to the brain.

“It is not a diagnosing tool but a great first time screening tool that warrants a follow up” said Joseph Matrullo.

It takes three minutes and it is completely non-evasive.

“It is like shining a flashlight in your mouth,” he said.

The “flashlight” transmits a certain wavelength of blue fluorescent light. The light excites certain molecules and tissue in the mouth and reflects back an apple-green color through the scope. Any cancer cells in the mouth will reflect back as black or a really dark green. Bacteria shows up orange with the system – an added benefit.

Once the cancer is detected, then it can be cut out.

“In a perfect world people would get screened once a year,” said Joseph Matrullo. “But those at highest risk are those who smoke, drink more than two alcoholic beverages a day, and who have a family history of cancer.”

As of now, most insurance polices do not cover the procedure. However, Joseph Matrullo pointed out the procedure is only \$45; “And it can give you peace of mind or it may save your life,” he said.