

## MedicineDentistry

## Haven't got time for the pain

Using Oraqix helps reduce the pain of deep cleanings and tooth scalings

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Gayle Kern is not ashamed to admit that she's afraid of the pain when going to the dentist.

"I'm a sissy," says Kern, who lives in Dobbs Ferry. "I've said I want nitrous oxide when I get a cleaning. I don't want to experience any pain."

So when Kern's dentist offered her a way to numb her mouth without the use of needles, she jumped at it.

Kern's dentist uses a product called Oraqix. It's made with Lidocaine and Prilocaine — the same medicines used in Novocain — but it's spread on the gum's surface, rather than injected. The thin applicator, which looks like a needle but has a blunt tip, allows the dentist to apply the gel to the sensitive periodontal pockets between the gums and the roots of the teeth before deep-cleaning the area.

Oraqix is squirted on as a liquid, allowing it to reach every nook and cranny, but turns to a gel when heated by the patient's

body, so it stays in place and only numbs the areas that will be worked on.

It may seem a lot like topical products like Orajel, but this new product blocks nerve pathways much further below the surface, says Dr. Joel Weaver of the American Dental Association. "It's pretty effective and its kind of unique in its class," he says.

Kern had the treatment for the first time last month in preparation a the deep-cleaning procedure called scaling and root planing.

"This is amazing. It really is," says Kern as she sat in the dentist's office during a break in the treatment. "I'm pleasantly surprised. Usually you expect discomfort at least from the needle."

Kern's dentist, Dr. Ira Handschuh, who has a practice in Greenburgh, says the drug has eased quite a bit of anxiety among his patients who are afraid of needles.

"I'd like to think I give a good injection, but the patients still feel it," he says. He adds that he's surprised the drug wasn't developed sooner. "It seems like such a simple idea."

For decades, doctors have relied upon a Lidocaine/Prilocaine topical anesthetic cream when stitching up skin gashes or inserting intravenous lines, says Dr. Linda Niessen, a professor at Baylor College of Dentistry in Houston and vice president for clinical education for Dentsply International, Oraqix's parent company. But

Oraqix took a while to develop because a polymer had to be found that could be used inside the mouth, is compatible with the anesthetics, and can be applied as a liquid and then turn into a gel.

Since Oraqix was approved a year ago, 207 dentists in this area have begun using the product — 45 in Rockland, 10 in Putnam and 152 in Westchester, according to Dentsply. That's about one-quarter of the number of member dentists listed by the American Dental Association for the area.

The ADA's Weaver says he expects more dentists will use the drug as they discover it. "A lot of people don't want to have an injection if they don't have to."

Oraqix also has the benefit of wearing off after about 20 minutes instead of the two to three hours that Novocain lasts.

"Whenever you use Novocain, you get the feeling like you're really blown up," says Kern, the dental patient. "I'm a little numb, but I don't feel that distorted."

The FDA has approved Oraqix only for scaling and root planing, procedures in which hard deposits are scraped from teeth and roots. These procedures prevent periodontal disease, which if left untreated can cause loose teeth and gum erosion. It can also be a source of cardiovascular disease, low birth-weight babies and unsuccessful fertility treatments.

Dentsply hasn't conducted studies on the gel's ability to numb the nerves inside the tooth's pulp,

so the product is not approved for other procedures such fillings or root canals. Niessen says the company is planning studies of other applications of the product.

In trials, Oraqix has caused headaches, surface gum reactions and a distorted sense of taste. But area dentists say they their patients haven't complained of any problems from the drug.

Oraqix is not as strong as Novocain, but dentists still believe the drug is still useful.

"The anesthesia that you get is not as profound as an injection but you don't need it as profound," for most deep-cleaning procedures, says Dr. Joseph Viana, a Yonkers dentist who has been using the gel since the spring.

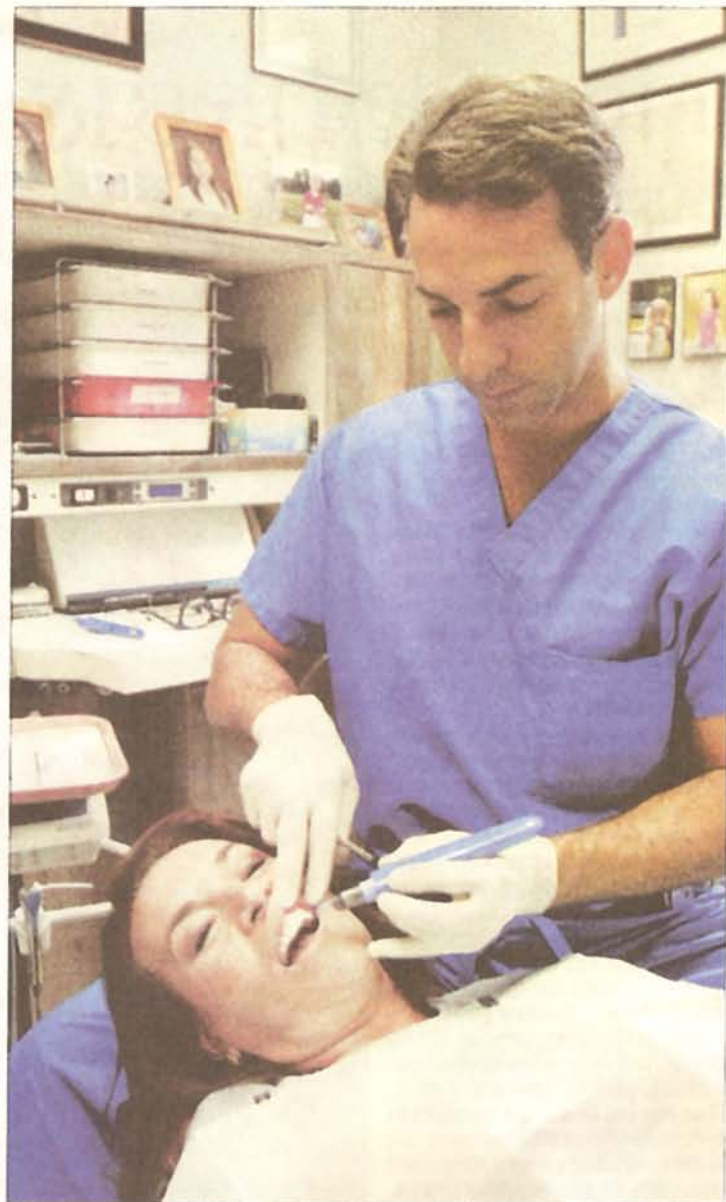
Handschuh agrees that Oraqix is strong enough to use alone with most of his patients. For those who need something stronger, the Oraqix at least dulls the pain of a Novocain injection.

Viana says his patients "feel that they can come more often" for scaling and root planing now that he offers Oraqix.

Dr. Peter Taub, a dentist in New City, says that Oraqix hasn't necessarily convinced any reluctant patients to have the deep cleaning, but those that use Oraqix with the procedure are pleased with the results.

"Patients leave smiling," he says. "They're happier."

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Tom Nycz/The Journal News

Dr. Ira Handschuh, treats Gayle Kern of Dobbs Ferry with a needle-free anesthetic gel called Oraqix at the offices of The Dental Design Center in Greenburgh.