

New Technologies Lead to Innovative Collaborations

A general dentist opens an airway-only treatment center that offers co-therapies

During his 20-year general dentistry career, Ryan Henrichsen, DDS, MAGD, saw hundreds of patients who were suffering from issues that had more to do with the structure of their mouths and throats than dental problems. “I was doing a lot of bite splints and guards because the dentists I was practicing with didn’t know how to manage bruxism and temporomandibular joint disorders [TMD],” he recalls. “I really started helping people by just doing what I was taught by the masters I learned from.”

Henrichsen is a graduate of the University of Iowa College of Dentistry, a Master in the Academy of General Dentistry, an alumnus of the Dawson Academy and the Pankey Institute, a VIP

with the Institute for Craniofacial Sleep Medicine and a visiting faculty member at Spear Education. He believes he found some incredible mentors through his continuing education endeavors. “I realized that my learning only just started

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PHOTO – RIGHT: Outside view of Respira – Airway, Snoring & TMJ

PHOTO – OPPOSITE PAGE: Dr. Ryan Henrichsen







the day I graduated from dental school,” he says. “I think that sometimes we lose that concept – that we are never done learning. I was fortunate to realize that learning really starts in practice.”

As a partner at Gentling Dental Care in Rochester, Minnesota, Henrichsen found himself building many mandibular advancement devices, treating TMD and focusing more on the airway component of these conditions. He soon noticed that the medical community also was doing

more research into the subject. Then, when dental professionals began to take advantage of computed tomography (CT) scanning technologies to assess patients’ airways, “I knew that things were changing big time,” he says.

Henrichsen, who had been mulling over the idea of opening a stand-alone office that focused exclusively on airway, snoring and TMJ issues for about seven years, needed to solve a little problem. Local dentists had begun referring

patients to him for oral devices and treatments, but with some reservations. A few told him, “Hey, I want to refer to you. But gee whiz, if I send my patient to your practice, they might want to stay for their general dentistry needs.”

Colleagues suggested he open a specialty practice focused solely on treating TMD and related conditions.

In January 2021, he opened a new solo practice in Rochester called Respira – Airway, Snoring, & TMJ.



JOINING FORCES WITH A PHYSICAL THERAPIST

Over the years, Henrichsen became good friends with a local physical therapist and they began referring patients to each other. His friend knew Gentling Dental Care had purchased some local dental practices. When he asked Henrichsen if he'd be interested in opening another practice connected to his building, Henrichsen explained his idea of an airway clinic. The concept makes sense in connection with

physical therapy (PT) because many PT patients suffer from conditions that compromise their airways. "They have forward head posture and do all sorts of weird things within their jaw system to accommodate pain and to breathe," Henrichsen explains.

The result of that first conversation is a unique partnership and an unusual dental treatment niche. "The physical therapists talk to their patients about how important sleep is to healing and so many

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PHOTO – OPPOSITE PAGE

Dr. Matt Merfeld and team member using Solea Model 2 with Solea Sleep System

PHOTOS – ABOVE, CLOCKWISE

Lexa sterilizer

A-dec overhead lighting

Team member working with patient



GO-TO TECHNOLOGIES

Solea Model 2 with Solea Sleep System (Convergent Dental)

The Vivos System (Vivos Therapeutics)

ARES sleep unit (Watermark)

A-dec 411 chairs

A-dec 12 o'clock work surface and instrumentation

Lexa sterilizer (W&H Group)

Synea 400 HS/LS handpieces (W&H Group)

Axeos CBCT (Dentsply Sirona)

Schick AE sensors (Dentsply Sirona)

Primescan intraoral scanner (Dentsply Sirona)

other aspects of life," Henrichsen explains. "They educate patients about mouth posture, head posture and why they're having problems with their neck or jaws. Then they say, 'To find out why you're clenching and grinding your teeth, let's send you across the hall and see what a sleep study shows.' Or, 'Let's do some airway imaging and see what that reveals.' I think the way we're working together may possibly be unique in the United States."

CUTTING-EDGE TREATMENT MODALITIES

Before joining Henrichsen in the practice, associate Matt Merfeld, DDS, saw so many crowded and misplaced teeth that he decided to complete a two-year course in orthodontics. When he started working with Henrichsen, he took additional airway training. Merfeld became a Breathe Institute Ambassador and began treating tethered oral tissues (TOT), which contribute to upper airway resistance. He and Henrichsen then took hands-on training for Convergent Dental's Solea Sleep CO2 laser so they can treat upper airway resistance and obstructive sleep apnea.



Merfeld says that one in ten infants and children are affected by TOT. If the condition isn't addressed, adults compensate or "maladapt." "We're seeing a lot of neck pain and shoulder pain," Merfeld says. "And just general tension. Those with the condition use the floor of their mouth and their neck muscles to compensate so they can breathe normally. There is this deep connective tissue attaching to the tongue muscles; it's not just this little frenum that you can see visually."

The condition can lead to other associated tongue position issues. "For instance, in adults, if the back of the tongue can't

go up to the roof of the mouth, we're going to see breathing problems," Merfeld adds. "What's the airway component of the tongue? It's not just swallowing and speaking, it's breathing."

"We use Solea for soft- and hard-tissue procedures," Merfeld says. "For surgeries, we use the soft-tissue function, which has a wavelength that vaporizes the tissue. It coagulates the blood cells, but it's not burning or cauterizing them, so we see much gentler healing."

Unlike other lasers, Solea is noncontact. "When you're applying the beam, the tissue

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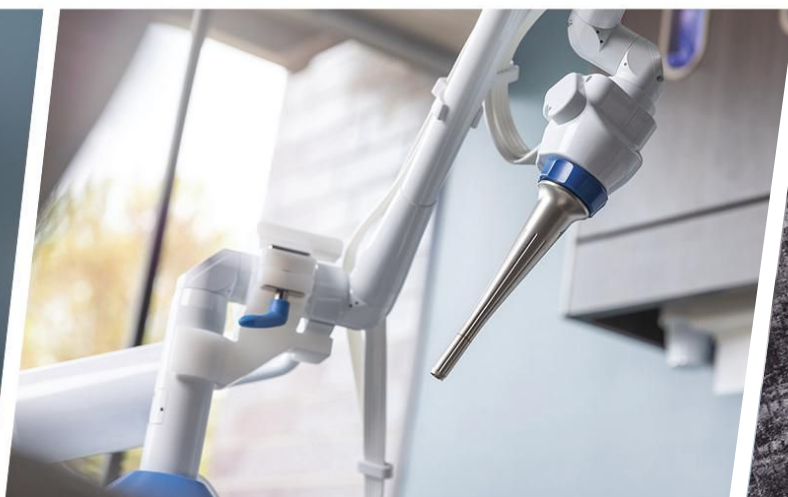
Reception area

PHOTO – OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE

Hallway

Operatory

Assistina dental instrument maintenance system



looks like it just starts to disappear,” Merfeld says. “We can do surgeries in infants in about 10 to 15 seconds with minimal to no bleeding. Healing happens rapidly, so within two weeks, the tissues look like we did nothing. It’s very interesting technology. And the benefit for a general dentist is using it for other functions: cutting hard tissues, extracting impacted molars, and prepping teeth. It’s very precise and can focus the beam down to the width of a human hair.”

“The same laser has an attachment we can use as a snoring treatment component,” Henrichsen adds. “It requires no anesthetic and takes 10 minutes or less. We just zap the soft palate tissue and the uvula area and it shrinks the tissue. The treatment alleviates snoring for about a year to a year and a half.”

According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, about 45% of adults snore sometimes and 25% snore

regularly. Of the population of people who snore, Henrichsen says that roughly two-thirds have sleep apnea. “So one-third we could treat with the Solea Sleep application,” he explains. “It’s pretty amazing and we’ve had some good results with it.”

Merfeld adds that a benefit of the Solea laser is that it doesn’t have as many settings as other lasers. “It’s operated more like a general handpiece. It has a traditional rheostat, and we control the energy of the beam as we’re cutting. You start off at very low power and bring it up to the energy level you need. Solea is very user-friendly and versatile.”

Switching to the Solea Sleep function requires only changing out a small handpiece. The software identifies what they’re using, what function they need and what the light pattern should be. “It contracts the tissue, versus cutting or ablating. It’s not removing any tissue.”



Henrichsen offers several devices to treat snoring. The Vivos (or the DNA appliance) is custom-designed for patients by a proprietary diagnostic algorithm after measuring and analyzing the oral cavity and airway with cone beam computed tomography.

Henrichsen explains that the Vivos appliance is more of a growth appliance that also still postures the mandible forward. It is designed with the goal of palatal expansion to better accommodate the tongue in the oral cavity. If successful, treatment results may allow patients to stop using all appliances

and continuous positive airway pressure machines.

The practice's protocol also includes having a myofunctional therapist work with patients, focusing on muscle therapy, tongue position, range of motion and other elements both before and after surgery. Henrichsen thinks there will be increasingly more myofunctional therapists who specialize in physical therapy for the tongue and lips.

Since the practice opened in January, Minneapolis-area dentists have started referring patients and going to the clinic themselves.

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The Respira – Airway, Snoring & TMJ team

PHOTO – OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE

Sterilization room

Solea Model 2 with Solea Sleep System tip

A-dec delivery unit



PHOTO – ABOVE

Axeos CBCT

PHOTO – OPPOSITE PAGE

Team member using Primescan
intraoral scanner

PRACTICE GROWTH AND SUCCESS

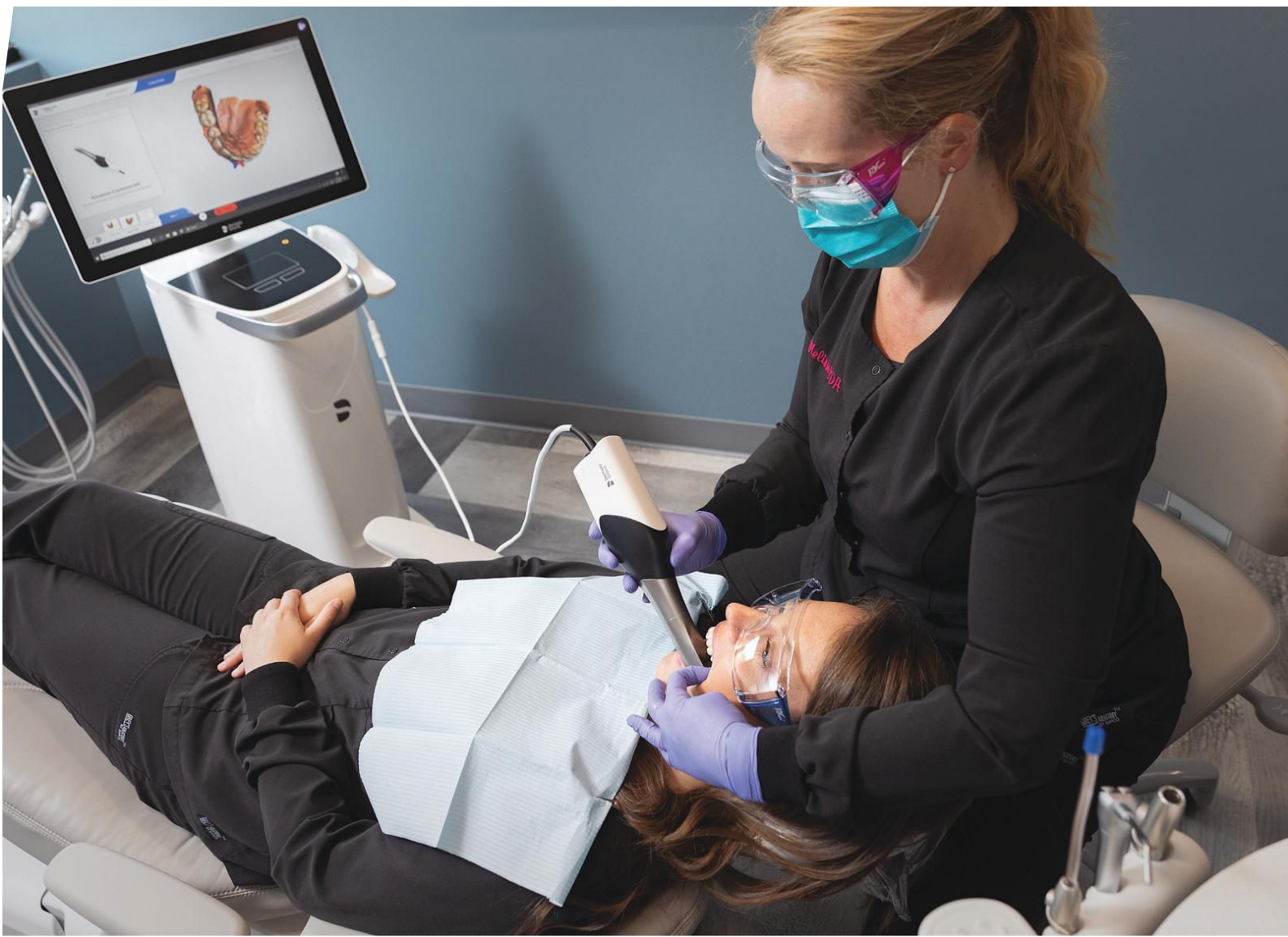
While the plans for the Respira airway clinic were still in the idea stage, Gentling Dental expanded by acquiring three general practice offices. “Our philosophy is to keep local dentistry local,” operations manager Krista Landgrebe says.

“Some of Ryan’s connections in the community decided that when they retired they didn’t want their practices to be acquired by bigger, more corporate practices. We strive to maintain the existing individual culture by keeping the original practice name and staff. We run them all independently, but we streamline their processes.”

Henrichsen’s group now has a patient base of about 8,500.

When Respira opened, they thought having only an office manager, Henrichsen and his assistant would suffice for about 18 months, but after only four months, they’re signing on their fourth provider, Alyssa Daley, DDS, because they’re so busy. The success of the new treatments made the staff even more excited about what they do. “And then that passion just spread out to teammates in the other offices,” Landgrebe explains. “Many of us are even in treatment ourselves.”

Landgrebe says that patient testimonials they’ve received are



having a big impact as well. “We’re watching how nervous they are at their first appointment when they don’t know if this is going to help, to the day they get their appliance and are so excited, to seeing over the months how much it’s impacted their life.”

“This all makes it easier for staff to educate patients,” Landgrebe continues. “Prospective patients call and say, ‘Hey, I saw your name says snoring. What can you do about snoring?’ And we tell them about the less-invasive laser, explain that they will meet with physical therapists and chiropractor, and talk with them about tongue ties and the TMJ.”

“It is cool to see how much this has changed our perspective on dentistry,” Landgrebe continues. “You’re used to someone coming in for a filling, a crown or routine hygiene appointment. But at Respira, they know we’re focusing on their home life and on their health, and that we’re helping them better themselves. It’s almost like we’re helping them through therapy sessions, which this basically is – therapy for their mouth.”

“Patients call or text us to say, ‘My child is finally sleeping through the night,’ or, ‘My husband woke me up six times last night to see if I’m still alive because I haven’t been snoring.’”

It’s just so incredible to have them realize that while Ryan, Alyssa and Matt are all dentists, they’re on a different level because they see more than just one tooth at a time. They see the whole mouth, the whole body, because your mouth is the gateway to your entire body.”

WORKING WITH PATTERSON DENTAL

Henrichsen is a relatively new Patterson Dental customer – he’s been with them for a little over two years. “It’s been amazing working with Patterson Dental,” Henrichsen says. “Ben Wizner has been patient and is 100% focused on what is best for us, not what is best for him, which is the way I live my life.”

Henrichsen describes the service he receives from the Patterson team as outstanding. “When we call them with an issue, they get back to us right away,” he says. “The trust that has been forged

between us is priceless.” Landgrebe agrees. “Patterson has been great. Our practice signed on as a buy-in group and Patterson always had our best interests in mind. They do checks on our equipment,

and they make it easy to prepare budgets on things. They’ve saved us tons of money on our dental supplies and by working strategically with vendors to get us the best deals possible.”

Building Out a Novel Concept in Airway and Snoring Treatment

Ben Wizner has been a Patterson Dental territory representative for three years, and his father has been one since 1986. “I have my own territory, but my dad and I are sort of a tag team and we have a lot of fun with it,” Wizner says. “We share ideas, chat throughout the day and cover each other’s accounts from time to time in a pinch.” The younger Wizner serves the Rochester, Minnesota, to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, markets and is based out of La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he and his father both live. “We’re having a blast being a father-and-son sales rep duo. He’s been a good mentor to me.”

Equipment specialist Scott Mans has been in the industry since 1986 as well and serves most of Wizner’s clients. “Scott is a career Patterson guy,” Wizner says. “He was in training at the same time my dad was. I work with Scott almost every day. Customers see me every three weeks, and Scott on a case-by-case basis.”

Wizner says that he didn’t meet Dr. Ryan Henrichsen for a couple of years, although he left him notes when he called on their office. “I’d leave them a good article or a product to try,” he recalls. “They were not doing business with Patterson Dental at the time, but one day he called me and we went out to lunch. He thanked me for always writing those notes. He thought it was authentic and decided we should re-evaluate our relationship.” Henrichsen was acquiring his fourth practice at the time.

Wizner began working with Krista Landgrebe, the operations manager, who oversees putting all the puzzle pieces together. “We went on a trip to A-dec

and learned a ton of valuable stuff out there,” he says. “They were going through growing pains and needed organization within their group, which is what we really do best. We leveraged a cohesive plan for their supplies and acquiring new equipment and technology. When they decided to build Respira a year later, it was a function of the work we’d done getting their business stabilized that enabled them to follow Dr. Ryan’s passion and open the TMJ and sleep facility.”

Mans explains that the concept was to start up a clinic designated to those areas, but they designed the office to accommodate general dentistry, too, in the event that it didn’t take off like they were hoping.

Now their other offices are referring patients there, as is the general community. “They have progressed so far along. They are leading the way to some degree in this category of dentistry, which is growing quite quickly,” Mans says. “Kudos to them for saying, ‘We’re going to do this and here is how we are going to present it in our marketplace.’”

Mans explains that having a specific practice for this specialized treatment was a great way to neutralize their position in a competitive marketplace. People who don’t even have a dentist come in because they snore. “And maybe if [Respira] makes a great impression, [the patient] will ask about seeing a dentist,” Mans says. “They’re a specialized support channel within the community.”

The Patterson team thought splitting the building with a physical therapy center was a good idea because of the

Patterson Dental also helped with design issues in all of the practice's locations. In fact, Patterson outfitted Respira with a fallback plan in mind so they would be prepared for all contingencies.

"We built it so it could be turned into a four-unit dental office," Henrichsen says.

As it turns out they did not need to worry about that. Respira –

Airway, Snoring & TMJ is doing just fine. In fact, the practice has even had offers to franchise and they are considering various avenues for growing the practice and moving forward. ●

synergies between sleep and other body systems. Wizner wouldn't be surprised if they replicate the concept in another market.

BUILDING DESIGN

The Respira office space is relatively small. It combines two closed private rooms and two open rooms, a myofunctional treatment room and a sterilization center. "There is a nice balance of privacy when they need it and more openness, which is less intimidating and may be more comfortable for some patients," Mans says. "It's open, airy, light and bright. The finishes are beautiful. It's very inviting and warm. We had a certain footprint to work with and we had a lot to fit in there. Everyone is happy with how the design came out in terms of using the square footage to its best potential."

Currently, almost every patient who comes in is new. "I think they're seeing 20 new patients a week in addition to those referred from their own practices," Wizner says.

"They are proving that this works," Mans adds. "I had never done a clinic



Having a specific practice
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dedicated entirely to sleep like this before and I was excited to see how

it would go. To know that it's been this successful is really encouraging."