

Smokeless Does Not Mean Harmless

One dentist's crusade against chewing tobacco and its deadly effects

by Kevin Schapley, DMD

My first encounter with oral cancer was when I was a junior in dental school at Boston University. During my oral surgery rotation at Boston City Hospital a young man entered the oral surgery clinic complaining of a sore that had been on his tongue for about two months. The sore would not go away.

After the patient completed all of the required medical and dental history forms, I examined the young man, whom I believe was 42 at the time. What I discovered was a sore spot on the right lateral border of his tongue. I remembered vivid pictures and descriptions of oral cancer from my oral pathology class I had taken earlier that semester.

The lesion was round, approximately one centimeter in width. The patient's pain became horribly real to me. Because I did not want to believe what I was seeing, I walked down the hall and asked an instructor to come and take a second look at this lesion. My next task was to formulate a diagnosis for the young man's sore, which sat on the side of his tongue.

What I had discovered was a classic case of squamous cell carcinoma of the right lateral border and ventral surface of his tongue. It took weeks to get the results back from the lab, which, in my eager desire to relieve the patient of his pain, seemed like a year. When I received the results, I had the difficult task of telling the patient what actually lay on the side of his tongue – cancer!

Having played college baseball as an undergraduate student at Barry University, I had been around smokeless tobacco a long time. My gut was telling me to ask this young patient about some of his habits.

What I found out after a candid discussion was this patient had dipped tobacco for more than 20 years. In fact, he told me his habit had him averaging “about a can a day,” he said honestly.

I can clearly say that was the day I made a conscious decision: I would do my level best at every patient interaction to remain vigilant in the fight against smokeless tobacco. I knew education would also become a key partner in my daily routine as a dentist.

I continued to encounter oral cancers in my patients in my next two years of dental school and the three subsequent years I served in the U.S. Army. While serving our country, I was the post's Tobacco Utilization and Smoking Cessation Officer for the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

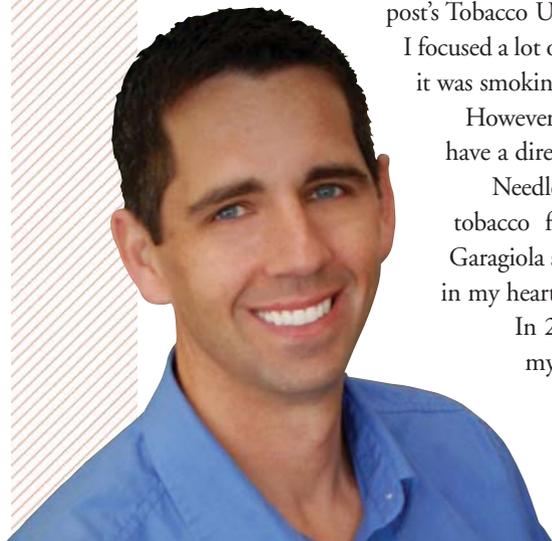
I focused a lot of time helping young men and women break the habit of tobacco, whether it was smoking or smokeless.

However, it wasn't until I opened my private dental practice that I felt I could truly have a direct impact on my patients' lives.

Needless to say, it is my vision to help patients live healthier lifestyles and be tobacco free. Like legendary NBC sportscaster and ultimate baseball fan Joe Garagiola says, “Smokeless does not mean harmless.” Those are words that truly stick in my heart and act as a guidepost for change.

In 2005, I had a unique opportunity to merge my passion for baseball with my passion for comprehensive dental health. I became excited when I learned that the Tampa Bay Rays announced they were moving their spring training to Port Charlotte, Florida, a mere five minutes away from my dental practice.

I eagerly contacted the team's doctor, Mike Reilly, and asked if the team had hired an official team dentist yet. Weeks later, after



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sending him a bio and some information about my dental practice, Reilly called me and offered me the dream job of serving as the team dentist while the team worked through spring training in Port Charlotte.

That first spring of 2009, when I reported to the clubhouse for the pitchers and catchers and coaching staff dental exams, I was ready to help out in any way I could. I knew the dangers and warning signs of smokeless tobacco and how this horrible product was part of the game of baseball. I became prepared to change the game of baseball one mouth at a time.

Exam after exam, I told each member of the Rays about the dangers of smokeless tobacco and how and why they needed to quit. However, the word "quit" is not in the typical "never-say-die" baseball players' lexicon. Using the same determination a runner needs to slide into home base, I met fierce opposition when I asked players to lay down the smokeless tobacco.

Still determined to enact a healthy lifestyle change, I re-examined the words I used with these young men. I began making statements, such as "When you are ready to change your habits and change your life, I suggest you look into an alternative to this smokeless tobacco, because it can kill you." I voiced the same speech over and over again for two years, with no visible luck of changing their habits.

I told the players to go onto the Internet to find alternatives to this disease-causing agent. What I faced as a result felt like it went in one ear and out the other. These guys were ready to play baseball, not search online for a smokeless tobacco alternative. Drastic times call for drastic measures.

When I entered my third year of baseball dental exams in the winter of 2010, in preparation for the 2011 baseball season, I took matters into my own hands. Using the same "never-say-die" mentality I used as an All-American baseball player, I brought the solution to the players.

I did the research for them and I was determined to make a difference this year for someone, anyone in the Rays' organization. I searched and searched, then came upon NiP Energy Dip. After reading about the product on the Web, I knew how Charlie felt when he opened that chocolate bar and found the golden ticket.

That spring I showed up to the clubhouse with samples of NiP Energy Dip ready and excited to tell the team about the awesome product I had for them to try. Exam after exam that spring, I saw the same players with the same gingival dysplasia, some getting worse. But I remained vigilant. I suddenly had more control than ever. Instead of telling them to enact the change, I gave them a solution.

Some players opened up the NiP Energy Dip right in front of me and gave it a try, while others told me they were simply not ready to make a change. But the feedback I got from the players, coaches and trainers was that NiP Energy Dip was great. I had no idea that when I became a dentist, I would be helping professional athletes with their overall health, but by work-

ing with Tampa Bay Rays, this opportunity has become a reality.

Until there is a cure for cancer I will continue my mission to educate patients about the dangers of smokeless tobacco. The ability to lead patients to a healthier lifestyle is a wonderful feeling and hearing success stories of patients quitting smokeless tobacco makes it all worth it. ■

Author's Bio

Kevin Schapley, DMD, was born and raised in Syracuse, New York. Schapley graduated from Barry University in Miami, Florida, where he was an Academic All-American in baseball. After graduating from Boston University School of Dental Medicine in 2001 he served as an Army dental officer in Vicenza, Italy from 2001-2004. He lives in North Port, Florida, with his wife and three children. He is the Tampa Bay Rays' and Charlotte Stone Crabs' team dentist.