

# PeriRx developing cancer tool for dentists

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HAVERTOWN — A personalized medicine company is out to make a trip to the dentist more meaningful than simply a checkup for cavities and a teeth cleaning.

PeriRx has licensed and is completing the development of a non-invasive saliva test for dentists that can be used to detect and predict oral cancer — the world's sixth most common cancer.

Stephen M. Swanick, CEO of PeriRx, said the 4-year-old Delaware County company is in discussions with several large pharmaceutical companies, including GlaxoSmithKline and Johnson & Johnson, about teaming up on the distribution of its molecular diagnostic test for oral cancer and a second product targeted the early diagnosis of diabetes.



Further applications include diagnostic tests for other cancers including lung, pancreatic, gastric, breast and ovarian cancer and a potential diagnostic test for Alzheimer's disease, Swanick said.

To date, the self-funded company has raised \$3 million from its five partners, who have started talking with potential angel investors. “We’d like to raise another \$1 million,” Swanick said.

PeriRx was founded in 2008 by Dr. [Neil Gottehrer](#), a Havertown dentist and the company’s chief financial officer, and Dr. [Jack Martin](#), a cardiologist and its chief medical officer.

Gottehrer had met Dr. [David T. Wong](#), director of the dental research institute at UCLA and the inventor of the company’s technology that uses saliva as a diagnostic tool for biomarkers of oral cancer, at a health-care conference in Atlanta seven years ago. (Biomarkers are naturally occurring molecules, genes, or genetic characteristic that can be used to detect the severity or presence of a disease.)

While Gottehrer’s interest was in periodontal disease, he was intrigued by Wong’s presentation and saw his work as a potential business opportunity.

“[Dentists] want to be able to give a definitive test [for oral cancer] ... and dentists understand saliva,” he said. “We are in saliva 24-7.” The PeriRx management team and other partners include Swanick, [Randall Siko](#), the company’s chief operating officer, and [Kevin Kelly](#), its general counsel.

Gottehrer recruited the four others in an unusual setting: they were all patients at his Delaware County office. The conversations about the company took place in a dental chair.

“They were pretty one-sided conversations,” Martin joked. Martin said a dentist office is a great setting for diagnostic tests because patients visit them more frequently than primary-care doctors.

“I have had patients I see [for heart problems] who tell me that they haven’t seen their family doctor in 10 years, but they see their dentist every four months,” he said.

Swanick said about 35 percent of dentists screen patients for oral cancer in a process that starts with a visual exam for lesions followed by the use of the fluorescence-based imaging technologies and devices to further examine oral tissue.

PeriRx’s low-cost, saliva-based test for oral cancer requires only a small saliva sample be collected and analyzed at a certified laboratory. Results are made available to patients within 72 hours. In screenings involving more than 1,000 patients, the test results were 96 percent accurate.

Saliva contains many of the same biomarkers and proteins present in blood, and it’s easier to collect.

Swanick said the company’s goals are to have the clinical studies completed, regulatory approval secured and diagnostic tests for both oral cancer and diabetes in the market next summer.

COO Siko said the company does not envision difficulties getting the test covered by insurers, given the cost to treat oral cancer patients averages between \$80,000 and \$100,000 a year.

“The insurance companies recognize the need and already have [reimbursement] codes for it,” Siko said. “The early detection reduces costs across the board.”

[\*Article Corrections Detail\*](#)

[\*John George covers health care, biotech/pharmaceuticals and sports business.\*](#)