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Department of
**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

An Roinn

**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

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To:

All General Dental Practitioners
Clinical Directors of Community Dental Service
Dental Directors and Consultants in Dental Public
Health HSSBs
Head of School and Clinical Director, School of Dentistry
Chief Executives of HSSBs
Chief Executives of Trusts

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18th April 2007

Dear Colleague

IMPORTANT: ADVICE FOR DENTISTS ON RE-USE OF ENDODONTIC INSTRUMENTS AND VARIANT CREUTZFELDT-JAKOB DISEASE (vCJD)

This letter is being issued to advise **all** dentists that endodontic files and reamers must be treated as single use instruments. This advice follows on from preliminary findings from research in progress by the Health Protection Agency in England. Similar advice in relation to single use of endodontic files and reamers has been issued in England, Scotland and Wales.

Background

Previous risk assessments for the transfer of vCJD infectivity via dental surgery have concluded that the risk is low. In 2006, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) issued a position statement on vCJD and endodontic dentistry based on a revised risk assessment produced by the Department of Health. The SEAC statement noted that there were uncertainties around the data and assumptions underpinning the assessment but that research underway should address some of these uncertainties. They recommended that "Once the research is complete and/or other data became available, the risks should be reassessed. A watching brief should be maintained".

The SEAC statement concluded, "It is unclear whether or not vCJD infectivity can be transmitted via endodontic files and reamers. However, given the plausibility of such a scenario and the large number of procedures carried out annually, it would be prudent to consider restricting these instruments to single use as a precautionary measure. Since sufficiently rigorous decontamination of these instruments is difficult, single use of these instruments would eliminate this risk, should it exist".

The Department of Health has now received preliminary findings from research in progress by the Health Protection Agency. Early results from studies in mice suggest that TSE (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies, the group of diseases that include BSE, vCJD and scrapie) infectivity can be found in dental tissues. The research is ongoing and further advice is being sought from SEAC. However, the results support the possibility that files and reamers could pose an effective route of transmission of infection, and therefore support the restriction of these instruments to single use on a precautionary basis in order to reduce any risk of vCJD transmission.

This risk needs to be seen in context. Since 1996 there have been 165 cases of vCJD in the UK. There are approximately 1 million NHS endodontic treatments undertaken every year in England and Wales, 125,000 in Scotland and 50,000 in Northern Ireland. There is however no current evidence of vCJD being transmitted by any form of dentistry.

Advice

All dentists must ensure that endodontic files and reamers are treated as single use instruments. In view of the microbiological evidence which shows that endodontic reamers and files cannot be reliably decontaminated it is advised that these instruments be treated as single use and disposed of appropriately after each patient. This should be done whether or not the instruments are labelled as single-use.

The DHSSPS will review the resource implications for the general dental services.

Further advice on local decontamination procedures will be issued soon from the DHSSPS.

Yours sincerely



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Acting Chief Dental Officer



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