FDA says mercury dental fillings not harmful

By Reuters

WASHINGTON, DC, USA: The US Food and Drug Administration said recently silver-coloured dental fillings that contain mercury are safe for patients, reversing an earlier caution against their use in certain patients, including pregnant women and children. While elemental mercury has been associated with adverse health effects at high exposures, the levels released by dental amalgam fillings are not high enough to cause harm in patients, the FDA said, citing an agency review of roughly 200 scientific studies.

In 2006, Moms Against Mercury and three other groups sued the FDA to have mercury fillings removed from the US market. Later that year, an FDA panel of outside experts said most people would not be harmed but that more information was needed.

But Susan Runner, acting director of the FDA division that oversees dental devices, said there was no “causal link” between amalgam fillings and health problems. “The best available scientific evidence supports the conclusion that patients with dental amalgam fillings are not at risk,” she told reporters on a conference call. Over the past 20 years, the agency has received just 141 reports of problems in patients with the fillings, she added.

That conclusion counters a statement the agency made last June that the fillings may cause health problems in pregnant women, children and fetuses.

The FDA’s decision could impact makers of metal fillings, which include Dentsply International Inc and Danaher Corp’s unit Kerr, as well as distributors such as Henry Schein Inc and Patterson Cos Inc.

According to the American Dental Association (ADA), about 50 per cent of fillings given to patients are mercury-filled, with a growing number of patients instead opting for lighter, tooth-coloured options such as resin composites. The ADA, which represents the dental industry, backed the FDA’s decision not to restrict mercury fillings, saying alternatives are also considered “moderate risk” by the FDA. “The FDA has left the decision about dental treatment right where it needs to be—between the dentist and the patient,” ADA President Dr John Findley said in a statement.

But Charlie Brown, a lawyer for Consumers for Dental Choice, said poorer people or those who receive their health care through large institutions such as the US military are more likely to receive the cheaper, silver-coloured fillings and are at greater risk for harm.

“Most consumers, and most dentists, have already switched to the main alternative, resin composite,” said Brown, whose group was part of the lawsuit settlement last June that called on the agency to issue more specific rules. His group is now weighing its legal options, he said.

Moms Against Mercury President Amy Carson said she was disappointed in the FDA’s reversal. Her group, along with several others, filed a new petition with the FDA on Tuesday, again calling for a ban on mercury fillings, she added.

(Edited by Daniel Zimmermann)

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UK universities say no to British applicants

Universities in the UK are reported to exploit a government policy that keeps British applicants out, while leaving no restrictions in terms of international applicants. According to newest figures released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency in London, the number of domestic higher education (HE) students enrolling at UK universities has stalled lately, while that of students coming to study from overseas has continued to rise.

After the US, Britain is currently the second most popular choice of destination for HE students. More than one university student in seven is from outside Britain, and those from outside the EU bring in 8 to 10 per cent of the total income of British universities, paying almost £1.9 billion in tuition fees last year.

The government has refused to fund enough places in order to accept extra applicants from the UK, even though the statistics are dampening hopes of the current administration of reaching the target of 50 per cent of 18- to 30-year-olds with a university education by 2010. Even after clearance, some 20,000 to 40,000 are expected to be left with no place at all this autumn.

Currently, there are 8,500 students enrolled in UK dental schools, of which 750 are from outside the EU.
“These are exciting times in which we live”
An interview with Prof. Thimios Mitsiadis, Head of the Institute for Oral Biology at the University of Zurich, on stem cell research in dentistry

These are exciting times in which we live. It is evident that in the near future—in about 20 to 30 years—we will be able to create new tissue with the aid of microbiology and genetics. Clinical studies that examine the use of dental stem cells for the regeneration of jaw bone are already underway. This is proof that progress in this regard is being made. We just need more information on how to achieve natural protection.

What progress has been made in stem cell research for the formation of enamel?

We recently formed a European consortium with researchers working with stem cells in Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Italy and France. The consortium’s objective is to isolate stem cells from teeth, the face and the head, and to use them to generate products. With stem cells, for example, natural implants could be produced. There are also tests being conducted in Italy to recreate teeth, but in my opinion this is far too complex to be realised at the moment. At this stage, we should only concentrate on creating tissue as a replacement for damaged or destroyed material, such as dentine and dental tissue.

Thank you very much for the interview.

This interview originally appeared in DT Germany No. 4, Vol. 7, 2009. Translation was provided by Annemarie Fischer, Germany.