Swine flu guidelines

Dentists in Wales have been issued guidelines from the Welsh Assembly on how to provide dental care to patients in the case of a swine flu pandemic. The guidelines also suggest that dentists are required to practice good general hygiene measures.

Swine flu hits dentistry

The Department of Health (DH) has issued guidance to dental practices on what to do if the swine flu outbreak turns into a pandemic. As Dental Tribune went to press, 52 people in the UK had been diagnosed with swine flu, according to the DH.

A spokeswoman for the DH said: ‘It is right that we are preparing for the possibility of a global pandemic. The UK’s arrangements are continuing to ensure that we are well placed to deal with this new infection.’

Laboratory tests are currently being carried out on 590 other people who may have the H1N1 virus, said the Health Protection Agency. Symptoms of swine flu include fever, cough, headache, sore throat and aching muscles and joints. People are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms. Transmission is through close contact with an infected coughing or sneezing person. Dentists are being warned that fewer patients will attend a dental practice for treatment during a pandemic as illness and anxiety will encourage patients to cancel or delay appointments.

But some patients both well and infected will need dental treatment. All patients should be screened for symptoms of flu before attending the practice by telephone and again on arrival at the practice, said the DH.

Treatment of infected patients should be limited to pain relief and should avoid aerosol-generating procedures where possible. Infected patients should be segregated from well patients. Ideally, practice and clinics will be identified and equipped (in consultation with the primary care organisations) to deal with infected patients. Where infected and well patients are seen at the same practice, a separation by space and/or time is essential.

Good general hygiene measures will be of prime importance in containing the infection. The DH recommends that adequate supplies of tissues, waste bins and hand washing facilities must be readily available.

Standard infection control procedures must be adopted for all patients (infected and well) and should include hand hygiene, PPE (with FFP3 respirators for patients with flu), decontamination of equipment and environment, and the safe disposal of waste.

Uniforms should not be worn outside of the practice and be taken home in a tied plastic bag for laundering. Protective plastic aprons are recommended to limit contamination of clothes. Staff within the practice will also be affected by a pandemic. The DH estimates that up to 35 per cent of staff may be absent for two to three weeks as a result of illness, caring for dependants, bereavement and transport difficulties. Many practices will have difficulty in maintaining their normal level of services.

It warns that in England and Wales dentists may fail to deliver their contracted number of Units of Dental Activity.

The guidance recommends that contractual payments continue with no penalties if providers have done everything within their powers to comply.