Helping busy hands keep healthy

Health and hygiene go hand in hand, according to Richard Musgrave of Schülke, who offers advice on preventing the spread of infection

The most important tool a dental practitioner possesses is his hands. Ultimately, all the technology and equipment in the world are useless if the hands operating it are not in prime condition.

As well as acting as a tool, your hands can also be a lethal weapon, especially when it comes to infection transmission in a surgical environment. The skin on the hands is the body’s first defense against infection from pathogens, as any cuts or lesions on the skin are easy sources of entry for bacteria and viruses, so good hygiene practises are crucial to reducing the risk of infection. Thoroughly washing hands, along with the use of gloves and alcohol rubs are the primary means employed by dental practitioners to maintain effective hand hygiene and prevent the spread of infection, however this can have a detrimental effect on the condition of the skin on the hands and arms.

A fine balance

Skin protection is an occupational hazard for dental practitioners and as special care must be taken to protect others from infection, so professionals are not leaving themselves open to long-term suffering and discomfort. A delicate balance is required to ensure that hands not only remain hygienic, but also that the dental professional does not suffer any ill effects.

Eczema is the highest ranked occupational skin disease and the reported cases of it in the medical profession are on the increase. Symptoms include itchy, rough skin, which is prone to flaking and cracking and although the disease is not infectious, it is unpleasant and uncomfortable for the sufferer.

Additionally, many people suffer from allergies associated with perfumes, colours and materials such as latex – all of which can play a large part in the implementation of many practice’s infection control procedures.

Very often, the hand creams and soaps used in dental practices include the value range from the local supermarket and because of this they are likely to contain colours and fragrances that can cause reactions in people who suffer from allergies. On occasion the reactive ingredients are not identifiable on the label, being described simply as ‘perfume’, so sufferers can find themselves using products that are going to cause an allergic reaction without even knowing it. Allergic reactions to colour are also a common problem, and severe cases can have horrific effects. Not only attacking the skin on the hands and the arms, but also sometimes causing the onset of asthma and even anaphylactic shock, which can prove fatal.

Latex allergy

Allergic reactions to natural rubber latex (NRL), the material used in the manufacture of medical gloves, have increased significantly over the last 10 years particularly within healthcare occupations. The proteins naturally present in NRL cause irritation either through direct contact with the skin or by inhalation of powder from powdered latex gloves. The reaction manifests itself in a red itchy scaly rash, which may spread to other areas.

Needless to say, it is of the utmost importance that suffering is kept to a minimum and that steps are taken to ensure that the dental professional’s health is not compromised. Wearing gloves to keep skin free of any pathogens is a necessity in the dental industry, however, for a practitioner suffering from a latex allergy, this can further exacerbate the problem. Many suppliers now also produce latex-free surgical gloves, which can be worn without discomfort while still upholding rigorous infection control policies.

Skin cleansing

Alcohol hand rubs have proven very effective in reducing the spread of potentially lethal bacteria such as MRSA on the hands of medical staff, however regular usage can severely compromise the condition of the skin, as can excessive exposure to skin-cleansing products. It is important to take restorative action to help minimise dryness and irritation, as weaker skin is more prone to skin complaints and cracking. In order to maintain healthy skin on hands and arms, regular use of a water-based moisturising cream or lotion is essential.

It is important to remember, however, that staff responsible for sterilisation should not use hand creams while handling equipment, and that instruments can become contaminated during handling and thus compromise the sterilisation procedure.

The maintenance of an effective infection control procedure is of the utmost importance with in a dental practice to maintain the health and wellbeing of both practice staff and patients.

About the author

Richard Musgrave has been in the industry for 18 years, and brought his knowledge and experience to Schülke five years ago. Initially working to develop both the range of infection control products as well as the acclaimed infection control training division, Richard is now responsible for the UK marketing team.

He attributes the success of Schülke to the quality of its product and its dedication to providing the best possible support to the dental profession both in the UK and beyond. This commitment is demonstrated through Schülke’s association with leading companies such as Dental Protection, for example. More information on infection control training is available from Schülke on 0114 240 5500 or at www.s4dental.com.

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