Dental professionals, such as doctors, nurses and all others working in the healthcare industry, have a duty of care to follow with regards to keeping patients safe and out of harm’s way. As the Department of Health (DH) states: “All health-care workers have an overriding duty to follow with regards to their patients.” The patient-treatment experience must be as efficient and effective as possible and public satisfaction is paramount. After all, when it comes to dentistry, private dentists would not be able to operate were it not for the individuals picking up the bill, and NHS dentists are of course, publicly funded. The dentistry profession must follow strict guidelines on when it comes to infection control and the decontamination of instruments. As professionals know, there are severe consequences for anyone found not complying with the Department of Health’s HTM 01-05 ‘Decontamination in primary care dental practices’ guidelines, published in April 2009. Conveying the steps that professionals have to take to ensure that these standards are achieved, the guidelines are a potent reminder of the depth that is needed when it comes to infection control. What’s more, with an increase in multi-drug resistant organisms (MDROs) such as Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) and Vancomycin-resistant Enterococci (VRE), it’s clear why the HTM 01-05 cannot, and must not be ignored.

A clean space
Decontamination is a major step in battling infections and it is advised that it takes place in a dedicated area within which the separate clean and dirty areas are clearly defined. Where possible, it is also advised that instruments should be decontaminated away from the surgery room. Instruments heavily contaminated with oral and other bodily fluids should first be thoroughly cleaned, either by hand in an ultrasonic bath, or by using an instrument washer/disinfector. Instruments must then be sterilised using an autoclave within which temperatures should reach 115-137 °C for three minutes. After decontamination, instruments must be stored in dry, covered conditions.

Additionally, The Dental Council’s ‘Code of Practice relating to Infection Control’ suggests that to facilitate good working practices and prevent cross contamination, clear zoning within the treatment area should take place. This includes a simple process of defining what areas will become contaminated during procedures and makes effective infection control easily achievable. The HTM 01-05 states that work surfaces, dental chairs, curing lights, hand controls, trolleys, spittoons and aspirators should be cleaned between patients using a suitable product.

Patient safety
An effective cleaning routine between patients not only satisfies Government guidelines, but also ensures that patients realise their safety is of paramount importance to the dental professional and the other surgery team members. Indeed, “implementing safe and realistic infection control procedures requires the full compliance of the whole dental team.” What’s more, “these procedures should be regularly monitored during clinical sessions and discussed at practice meetings.”

However, establishing the correct manner in which to implement this cleaning routine can be difficult. With so many products on the market, it can be tough making a choice about which one to trust.

Popular products
Dental professionals should note that the HTM 01-05, based on evidence the DH has collected, recommends the use of commercial bacterial cleaning agents and wipes to maintain cleanliness and minimise viral contamination of surfaces.

‘Decontamination is a major step in battling infections’

Achieving the optimum levels of cleanliness and controlling infections is important to dental professionals seeking to maintain a standard of care for patients and in turn, stay in business: “Failure to employ adequate methods of cross-infection control would almost certainly render a dentist liable to a charge of serious misconduct.”

Dentists must ensure that their entire dental team carry out effective cleaning practices to comply with the HTM 01-05 guidelines, and that in turn their patients are satisfied with the standards of care implemented in their practice.

Face the consequence
Threats of infection are always upon us, and infection cannot be completely prevented. The general public hear horror stories from the newspaper pages about infections such as Swine Flu or MRSA and are therefore obviously concerned over the possible dangers that could result from visiting the dentist. Healthcare practices and dental professionals cannot afford to take a risk and should ensure that their methods and processes are up to standard immediately. Make sure that you are using the correct decontamination products, today – or face the consequences.

References

About the author
Richard Musgrave is responsible for the UK, market-training division of Schülke’s acclaimed infection control training division.

How clean is your practice?
Strict guidelines must be followed when it comes to infection control and decontamination of instruments, so it makes sense to get into a sensible cleaning routine, says Richard Musgrave

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