Endodontic instruments could transmit vCJD, say scientists

Scientists could not rule out the risk of the human form of ‘mad cow disease’ being transmitted via surgical instruments, it has emerged. Guidance issued by all four UK chief dental officers this Spring said endodontic reamers and files should only be used once because of the risk of spreading variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) between patients.

But the move was criticised by dentists who said there was little evidence to show there was any danger in re-using the instruments. "We are appalled that once again the profession has suffered the hasty imposition of a measure for which the evidence was slim," said British Dental Association chief executive Peter Ward in a letter to members.

The Department of Health has now published the scientific research that led to the decision. A preliminary analysis by health protection experts found the 'worst reasonable case scenario' was that 150 patients a year could be infected by dentistry. There is a risk the disease could be spread via surgical instruments including those used in dentistry although there are no known cases of this happening.

The paper was compiled by Dr Peter Bennett and Dr Peter Grove who first presented their findings to the Spongiform Encephalopa- thy Advisory Committee (SEAC) last year. It is based on a series of assumptions including that there may be people who carry the disease but do not develop symptoms. The research also assumed dental pulp could be infected with the disease and that vCJD survives on instruments after they have been disinfected.

It concludes there could be between 2.5 and 7.5 per cent chance of patients catching the disease from instruments previously used on an infected pa- tient. The vCJD Incidents Panel says patients must be informed if there is anything above a one per cent risk. The analysis suggests that if one in every 10,000 people carries the disease then 20 to 150 people could be infected each year through endodontic treat- ments such as root canal therapy.

The researchers said they could not rule out the possibility that dentistry could contribute to an epidemic. However, they stressed that there were many un- certainties and that some of the calculations they had made were 'very crude'. The report says: 'The risks considered here may be con- siderably smaller than as presented or simply not exist. On the other hand, the 'reasonable worst case scenarios' presented here are also fully consistent with the known facts.'

The paper concludes: 'What- ever may be the actual case, the risks outlined in this paper could be avoided by making the files and reamers used in endodontic den- tal surgery single use.' A further assessment of the risks is now under way.

Bolton DCPs trained to offer stop smoking advice

D ental professionals in Bolton are to be trained up to offer advice to smokers who come in for teeth check-ups. The training, which will mainly be given to dental nurses at NHS dental surgeries, will be rolled out over the next two years.

The move is part of wider ef- forts within the NHS to get den- tists and dental care professionals involved in supporting patients to stop smoking. This summer the DoH launched guidance for primary care dental teams, which said most dental practices should offer advice and point patients to smoking cessation sessions run by their local primary care trust.

However, the document—Smoking free and smiling, said some practices may want to go a step further by having staff trained to offer more detailed advice and support.

Chewing gums approved by US dentists

A range of sugar free chew- ing gums has been given the stamp of approval by US dentists because they can help fight tooth decay. The American Dental Association (ADA) Council on Scientific Affairs awarded its Seal of Acceptance to three prod- ucts made by confectionery giant Wrigley.

The Orbit, Extra and Eclipse chewing gums were subject to a tough review process. Manufac- turers who wish to be considered for the ADA Seal of Approval must submit information including ob- jective data from laboratory and clinical studies and a full list of in- gredients. The council looked at studies that showed chewing the gum for 20 minutes after meals helps increase saliva production.

Saliva helps wash away plaque acid and bathes teeth in minerals such as calcium, phosphate and fluoride known to strengthen tooth enamel and help prevent ca- ries. Other products that have gained the ADA Seal of Appro- val include toothbrushes, tooth- pastes, dental floss and mouth rinses.