Infection control
Richard Musgrave discusses the importance of effective surface decontamination

With the ever increasing focus on the importance of infection prevention and control, particularly since the recent outbreaks of MRSA and C. Diff, the need to enforce stringent decontamination protocols has never been more relevant. Infection control has and always will be a subject of paramount importance in medical and healthcare environments; however, in recent years there has been an increased level of awareness, both within the field and amongst the public, of the risks associated with sub-standard cleaning procedures. This in turn has highlighted the obligation of every member of the dental team to strictly adhere to infection control procedures.

It is essential that all work surfaces and floor coverings are continuous, non-slip and where possible, jointless. It is a well established fact that surfaces are especially vulnerable to contamination from potentially infective microorganisms, and as such require strict and systematic decontamination that will significantly reduce the risk of infection to both patients and staff alike. Arguably the most effective way of ensuring that decontamination is executed as effectively as possible is a technique known as ‘zoning’. Zoning is a preliminary step to surface disinfection, focusing on clearly defined areas that are prone to contamination and involving the separation of contaminated and clean areas along with the allocation of dedicated space to ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’ instrument storage. When zoning, the areas that must be included are:

- Dental chair and spittoon
- Work surfaces
- Controls/switches
- Floors

Practices must ensure that appropriate and sufficient training is given to all members of staff, and document it as evidence. It is essential that dental nurses always deal with treatment areas, although it is acceptable to employ a cleaner to take care of floors and public areas. When staff go through the process of cleaning and disinfecting, it is then that, damage and wear come to light, enabling them to be dealt with quickly so as to avoid bacteria and dust accumulation.

Recent research indicates that the regular use of commercial bactericidal cleaning agents and wipes is effective in maintaining cleanliness whilst potentially reducing viral contamination of surfaces. In the last few years, infection scares have highlighted the very real need to ensure that decontamination protocols, such as the one below, are followed:

- Treat your patient
- Discard all disposable protection
- Remove and discard all disposable end fittings from the suction unit
- Disinfect the chair and hand controls
- Clean and disinfect surfaces, chairs, spittoons and other risk areas
- Add new disposable protections and fittings

The importance of strict and effective cleaning and decontamination cannot be overemphasised, it is essential to all dental practices and should be adhered to by all staff members.

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