

Safety warning – handpiece alert

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The most recent warnings, issued in December, identify significant risk to patients and users of even slightly inefficient electrical handpieces. They stress there is often no warning of malfunction until injuries are sustained.

In its industry safety statement, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) published its findings: "Patients have been severely burned when poorly maintained electric dental handpieces were used during dental procedures. Some patients had third degree burns which required plastic surgery."

The warning continues: "Burns may not be apparent to the operator or the patient until after the tissue damage has been done, because the anaesthetized patient cannot feel the tissue burning and the handpiece housing insulates the operator from the heated attachment."

The news is a timely warning to Australian dentists about handpiece risks, especially those using electric handpieces and speed increasing heads.

Director of leading Australasian handpiece repair specialists, Julian Hodges of Handpiece Hotline, says the risk of serious injury to users and patients is a growing concern.

"For quite a while the repair industry has been concerned about the risks of speed increasing handpieces," he says. "There's no doubt about it. The combination of extremely fast, heavily geared and electrically powered

technology in handpieces means there is an absolute necessity for dentists to maintain and respect this equipment diligently."

Hodges says the high performance of electric handpieces, especially with speed increasing heads, means that even the slightest compromise in precision – from usual wear and tear, poor repair, sterilisation procedures or overdue maintenance – can lead to overheating and severe burns.

"The problem is that electric-driven handpieces compensate for performance problems with extra power – that's a formula for burns," he explains. "The dentist won't feel the unit getting warm or even acting strangely in most cases, and the anaesthetised patient won't know until they get home."

The American watchdog has issued prevention guidelines across the nation with advice that regular maintenance will reduce the incidence of overheating as well as the risk of injury and costly compensation and replacement expenses.

They recommend dentists immediately check when rotary surgical handpieces were last serviced and lubricated.

"It's really a question of treating this equipment with respect," says Hodges. "And it makes sense whichever way you look at it, because regular, professional maintenance makes

handpieces last longer, work better and cost less in the long run.

"When you add safety into it, it's easy to see why there are some moves here in Australia toward a more thorough maintenance schedule for practices."

Dental Health Services Victoria studied a scheduled servicing and instrument management program involving more than 7,000 handpieces and found "outstanding success" in extending the service life and reliability of handpieces in major clinics across the state.

Scheduled maintenance resulted in a 90% decrease in turbine replacements and a 70% decrease in head gear failures. As a result, handpiece servicing costs to the department have more than halved.

"There's a smarter, safer, cleaner way to work than using handpieces until they fail," says Hodges.

Handpiece Hotline actively encourages the change in practice, providing a free check, clean and lubrication service to dentists across the country. Within the Sydney metropolitan area, Handpiece Hotline will collect handpieces by courier as part of the free offer. Elsewhere Handpiece Hotline supplies free satchels for sending equipment by Express Post for a two-day check and clean turnaround. ♦



Julian Hodges

You can study the American findings and safety warnings at www.fda.gov/cdrh/psn/show17-burns.html

Explore a maintenance plan or book a check and clean at www.handpiecehotline.com.au Ph: 1800 30 80 30

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