

Whiter than white: the current status of dental bleaching in the United Kingdom

In this month's feature looking at Tooth Whitening, **DR LINDA GREENWALL BDS** MGDS RCS MRD RCS MSC FFGDP gives an update as to the current situation regarding tooth bleaching, and details the aims of the new British Dental Bleaching Society...

INTEREST in bleaching teeth has grown exponentially in the last decade. This interest from the general public in having whiter teeth is related to a general improvement in health care needs; also there has been a massive growth in the public wanting to improve their appearance. In the

appearance related society that we live, having a white smile is an asset that is considered highly desirable as it equates with good health, youthfulness and beauty. These days in conversation one engages the eyes and the smile and as a general rule for the dental profession, the white teeth

should match the sclera of the eyes. So for the dental team, when assessing whether a patient will benefit from tooth whitening one assesses the whiteness of the sclera against the present colour of the teeth. If the colour of the teeth is more yellow than the white of the eye, success with tooth whitening can be achieved.

New society

As the interest in tooth whitening continues there are many new factors to consider. A new dental society, the British Dental Bleaching Society has been established to help train the dental profession and their team members in the most appropriate methods of whitening teeth.

Education in tooth whitening and dental bleaching is the founding basis of the society to help members undertake efficient, safe and appropriate bleaching techniques for patients. The society also aims to lobby Parliament to make changes in the UK law to permit the concentration of hydrogen peroxide to be increased as well as making bleaching techniques using hydrogen peroxide and carbamide peroxide permissible within UK legislation. MP Sir Paul Beresford, a founding member of the group, has already been successful in asking questions to the health secretary, Ann Keen, in relation to who can undertake tooth bleaching and which method. Her reply was that only dentists may undertake tooth whitening, which may be carried out in the home bleaching method of using the light in the surgery. This question was extremely useful and has clarified the situation for dentists.

Europe

Although the law in the UK has not been changed since the Law Lords ruling in 2001, it is hoped that possible changes may be underway in Europe soon. The Law Lords ruled that the tooth bleaching materials should be classified as cosmetic products. As such they fall part of the Cosmetic Products Legislation, which states that products used for tooth whitening purposes should not contain more than 0.1 per cent hydrogen peroxide. Most of the dental products on the market for tooth whitening purposes contain three per cent hydrogen peroxide that is equivalent to 10 per cent carbamide peroxide. There are no effective products for tooth whitening that contain the permissible amount at 0.1 per cent hydrogen peroxide. These products have been researched for the last 20 years and have been shown in clinical and in vitro research to be effective and safe for tooth whitening. These tooth-bleaching materials have also been shown to be effective against gum disease, root surface decay in the

elderly and generalised dental decay (research is ongoing).

Scientific Committees in Europe SCGNFF have been assessing the concentration of hydrogen peroxide, which may be permissible. In their recent ruling and that of the European committee for dentists (CED), of which Stuart Johnson from the BDA is the chairman of this group, has stated that whilst 0.1 per cent is safe to use for up to six per cent for home bleaching of teeth. The SCGNFF released a position paper of the current status and safety of hydrogen peroxide in January 2008 (available on the BDS website). Therefore it is likely that in the near future, six per cent hydrogen peroxide will be the permitted amount to use for tooth bleaching purposes to be administered by dentists. The various European countries are still debating the final details and whilst they ponder on the minutia, it is hoped that this will be ratified by the European dentists in the Autumn of 2008.

GDC ruling

In the meantime the General Dental Council released a statement on its website in June stating that it is now permissible for dental hygienists and dental therapists with the appropriate training to undertake tooth whitening. The GDC also stated that dental nurses may take impressions for study models to be used to make bleaching trays. This is a great break through and will help the entire dental team to be involved and integrated into the care of the patient during the bleaching treatment. This is a positive step and we welcome this forward-thinking proactive move by the GDC. Those hygienists, therapists and dental nurses that become involved with bleaching should check with their defence agencies whether they would need extra cover. This may be included in the dentists' membership and dentists and their team should check with the protection body.

The illegal practice of tooth whitening treatments by beauty therapists in the United Kingdom has been clarified by the GDC, who state that only registered dentists and their appropriately trained dental team members may undertake tooth whitening. Some beauty therapists have been using chlorine dioxide as a

whitening agent, unfortunately this has caused permanent damage for some members of the general public. There have been a series of highly publicised cases in the media, which has drawn attention to the fact that tooth whitening is not always safe. This has a double-edged sword

as the general public may now confuse all tooth whitening treatments with being unsafe. It is hoped that the establishment of the British Dental Bleaching Society will help to alleviate fears to demonstrate that tooth whitening undertaken by a member of the dental team is

safe, beneficial and has a long-lasting effect.

Delighted by result

Tooth whitening has successfully been shown to improve dental patients' self esteem and give them positive health gain. Most dental patients who have had

tooth whitening undertaken with their dentists are delighted with the outcome. As a result they smile more, look after their teeth better and 80 per cent of patients return for further aesthetic/cosmetic dentistry to continue on the journey of improvement of their dental health.



About the Author

Dr. Greenwall graduated from Wilton, Johannesburg, in 1984. 1993 saw the launch of Dr. Greenwall's own multi-disciplinary practice, in Hampstead, London. In June 2008 Dr. Greenwall launched the British Dental Bleaching Society (BDBS), which aims to lobby for changes in the controversial bleaching legislation and to educate dentists in tooth whitening.