

THE NEW ZEALAND DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC

POSITION STATEMENT ON DENTAL AMALGAM

AUGUST 2009

Dental amalgam is a safe and durable material that has been used by dentists to restore teeth for well over 100 years. It is a mixture of metals including silver, copper and tin to which mercury is added. The mercury binds these components to form an alloy which has a long established record of safety and durability as a dental filling.

Many scientific studies have shown that the very small amounts of mercury released from an amalgam filling during its placement or removal and in fact over the whole life of that restoration do not cause any adverse health effects.

The New Zealand Dental Association (NZDA) affirms the safety of dental amalgam as a restorative material. Patients are assured that the current extensive scientific evidence shows amalgam fillings, whether old or new, do not constitute a threat to their health.

Numerous scientific studies have demonstrated that there is no evidence of any association linking amalgam fillings with chronic degenerative diseases, kidney disease, autoimmune disease, cognitive function, adverse pregnancy outcomes, or any non-specific symptoms. Also, the studies have failed to demonstrate that removal of amalgam fillings will improve patients' health or result in the remission of any symptoms of illnesses.

The NZDA is a member of the FDI World Dental Federation, a body of national dental associations of more than 100 countries, with affiliation to world research organisations. The current policy statement of the FDI World Dental Federation and the World Health Organisation supports the continuing use of dental amalgam as a safe and effective restorative material.

Mercury Hygiene

Mercury in its elemental form (which is not the same form as a completed dental restoration) is considered an environmental hazard. The NZDA affirms the need for dentists and their staff to adhere to strict guidelines developed both in New Zealand and internationally, when using dental amalgam. This includes the use of devices to prevent the discharge of amalgam into the environment and the safe storage of waste amalgam.

Choice of Materials

Patients have the right to ask about and be advised of the advantages and disadvantages of the various materials used to restore teeth. Dentists have a duty under Right 6 of the Health & Disability Commissioner's Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights Regulation 1996 to advise patients of the most appropriate option, and of any risks, side effects, benefits and costs.

Ethical Consideration

Contemporary best-practice dentistry is founded on the principles of evidence-based treatment modalities derived from research published in peer-reviewed scientific literature.

The current evidence base confirms that there is no justification for a dentist to promote the removal of amalgam and replacement with other materials for health reasons. A dentist, who suggests that the removal of amalgam has the capacity to cure or alleviate diseases, infections or other conditions, is acting unethically. Such treatments are not based on accepted scientific knowledge or research.

Patient Requests

Dentists faced with the request from a patient to remove amalgam for whatever reason, should adhere to the principal of non-maleficence – that is: first, do no harm. Dentists in this situation have an obligation to explain to the patient the current scientific evidence, and to identify any potential harm that could result in the removal and replacement of amalgam fillings. Importantly, a dentist must also discuss current health concerns regarding any replacement filling material.

Side Effects

Documented cases of a patient presenting with an allergy to any of type of dental restorative material are extremely rare. There have been reported cases of allergies or local side effects to dental amalgam and the other metals comprising this dental filling material. In such cases, where the patient has a known allergic reaction to amalgam, the dentist must avoid the use of amalgam.

Dental Procedures and Pregnancy

The New Zealand Ministry of Health promotes the “precautionary principal” and states that it is “prudent during pregnancy, where clinically reasonable, to avoid elective dental procedures, including the placement or removal of any filling material”.

The NZDA recommends that dentists use their professional judgement in making clinical decisions in consultation with the patient in pregnancy situations. To be prudent means “being careful to avoid undesired consequences”.

Further Research

The NZDA supports continued research into the safety of all dental materials including amalgam. This recognises the principle that all materials used in the treatment of diseases should be continuously tested, using the latest evidence-based research methodology. Changes in treatment modalities and the use of materials must be based on peer-reviewed scientific evidence.

This Position Statement was approved by the Board of the New Zealand Dental Association August 2009 and will be reviewed again in 3 years time or sooner if the evidence base changes.