

Could This Happen to You?

The following article is being reprinted from the July 2013 issue of Milestones. The message in this article is worth repeating, given the recent closure of a Burlington dental practice due to infection control concerns. An investigation by the Halton Region Health Department has identified that clients who received dental services at a dental clinic in Burlington may have been exposed to improperly cleaned instruments used for procedures. As a precaution, the Halton Region Health Department recommended that clients of this dental clinic contact their physician (or go to a walk-in clinic if they do not have a physician) to discuss testing for hepatitis B, hepatitis C and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Could you imagine sending a letter out to all your clients advising them that they may have been exposed to an infectious disease in your office? In a recent news release, the public learned of an Oklahoma dentist who treated clients under unsafe and unsanitary conditions. The clinic was found not to have a written infection control protocol, and more shockingly, had not been appropriately cleaning dental equipment. Investigators found rusty instruments, potentially contaminated drug vials and improper use of a sterilizer. As a result, the Health Department sent letters to approximately 7,000 of the clinic's patients informing them of a possible infection risk and recommending that they be tested.



While full details of the Oklahoma investigation may never be made public, as of May 9, 2013, the Tulsa Health Department reported that their ongoing investigation has so far identified 70 individuals who have tested positive for hepatitis C and 4 individuals who have tested positive for hepatitis B. Positive results for HIV infection have also been reported for 3 individuals.

This news was as appalling to dental hygienists as it was to the public for whom we provide dental hygiene care.

The executive director of the Oklahoma Board of Dentistry reported that the agency does onsite inspections only if the agency receives a complaint against a particular dentist. This is particularly surprising when you learn that the Oklahoma Department of Health's consumer protection division conducts restaurant inspections on a regular basis and lists the results on their website. If "imminent health hazards" exist, the establishment must cease operating until cleared. Does this mean it is safer to visit a restaurant in Oklahoma than a dental office?

In the practices of Ontario dental hygienists, inspections regularly occur as part of the CDHO Quality Assurance Program. Dental hygienists are required to record their infection prevention measures as part of their professional portfolio and questionable practices are followed up with an onsite visit. The cumulative results of CDHO portfolio and practice reviews provide overwhelming evidence that dental hygienists in the province are dedicated to meeting the expectations of their clients in regards to infection control procedures and sterilization/sterilizer monitoring.

The College's promise to dental hygiene clients states that the public can expect to receive quality preventive oral hygiene care from registered dental hygienists in the province. This includes following a scientifically accepted, evidence-based infection control policy as required by the College's published Standards of Practice. The CDHO has prepared a "Questions to Ask Your Dental Hygienist About Infection Control" fact sheet to help inform your clients of acceptable practices. Being open and transparent about your infection control practices and addressing any questions from your clients will reassure them that you care about their safety and that your office protocols are designed to prevent the spread of infection.



Five Questions to Ask Your Dental Hygienist About Infection Control

1 How do you sterilize your instruments after use?

Current infection control guidelines recommend that instruments that penetrate or contact oral tissue be sterilized using equipment called an autoclave that uses steam and pressure to kill all infectious material. Some may also use sterilizers that use chemicals or dry heat. This process must always be performed before instruments are used on another person. Most dental instruments including handpieces (or dental drills) are designed to withstand repeated sterilization.

2 How do you know that your sterilizer works properly?

Most practices use several methods to tell if their sterilizer is working. The first is by watching the gauges and readouts for proper temperature and pressure. The second is by using a colour-change indicator on their instrument wrapping or packaging. Instruments should be sealed in bags or cassettes with an indicator that changes colour after exposure to high heat, high pressure or other accepted sterilizing conditions. These indicators also tell the office staff that a package has been sterilized. Storing instruments in pouches or wraps ensures that the instruments remain free of any bacteria or germs until use. Your dental hygienist should be opening a new package just for you and will be able to show you these indicators on their packaging. The third test is using a vial or envelope that contains living spores, which are then put in a regular sterilizer cycle. This test provides the best guarantee that a sterilizer is working. It can be performed right in the office, but may also be sent out to be checked. Ask to see the records showing that the spore test or biological monitoring has passed. Current guidelines require that a sterilizer that fails a biological monitoring test not be used until it has been shown to be working correctly.

3 Do you change your gloves for every client?

New gloves should be used for all clients. You should see your dental hygienist taking them out of the glove dispenser, not from an unsterilized countertop. Your dental hygienist will take a new pair of gloves if she/he leaves the room or if anything other than sterile instruments or your mouth is touched.

4 How do you clean the room before I arrive?

Between patients, your dental hygienist should disinfect all the surfaces they are likely to touch during treatment. You may also find that some surfaces such as light handles, tubing or control switches are covered with a plastic barrier. These barriers should be removed and discarded between clients. Both of these methods help to eliminate the possibility of transferring germs from a contaminated surface to you. You may find that your dental hygienist uses a combination of disinfecting and barriers to ensure that surfaces in the treatment room are not contaminated.

5 What if I see you do something that I'm not sure about?

If you are unclear on, or uncomfortable with, any of the precautions your dental hygienist takes to protect you, speak up. If necessary, ask to see the office's sterilizing area. The overwhelming majority of dental hygienists work very hard to ensure that you are protected against cross-contamination during treatment and will be happy to show you what they do to ensure that you are receiving safe care. Feel free to ask questions and communicate any concerns. **CDHO**