

Policy Statement 2.2.8 – Community Oral Health Promotion: Teeth Whitening (Bleaching) By Persons Other Than Dental Practitioners

Position Summary

Only registered dental practitioners should use teeth whitening (bleaching) agents, and they should be able to provide patients with whitening agents of up to 20% hydrogen peroxide or equivalent for home use under the practitioner's guidance. Authorities must take appropriate action to protect consumers from the risks of tooth whitening being provided illegally by unregistered and untrained providers.

1. Background

- 1.1. The use of bleaching agents to lighten the colour of teeth has become a common part of general dental practice. However, the procedures involved can be potentially hazardous to the patient, and the process of bleaching involves irreversible chemical changes.
- 1.2. Hydrogen peroxide is the active bleaching agent in professionally applied dental bleaching products. The effective concentration of hydrogen peroxide varies greatly from concentrations as low as 3% for *whitening toothpastes* to 35% in some *office-based* bleaching products. Many bleaching products available contain carbamide (urea) peroxide which is more stable than hydrogen peroxide but generates hydrogen peroxide as the active bleaching agent. The application of energy to the hydrogen peroxide in the form of heat, high intensity visible light, laser light or other energy forms may accelerate the action of hydrogen peroxide, however the long-term outcome is similar.
- 1.3. While weak solutions of hydrogen peroxide have been used in the oral cavity for many years with few problems, when used in higher concentrations the potential for adverse effects on the oral tissues is high.
- 1.4. WorkSafe Australia's current guidelines designate hydrogen peroxide at concentrations above 5% as a hazardous substance. Direct exposure of the skin, eyes and mucous membranes to hydrogen peroxide may cause severe irritation or burns, while ingestion may cause irritation to the oesophagus and stomach resulting in bleeding or sudden distension. Percolation of hydrogen peroxide into the pulpal tissues, often accelerated by exposed dentine and enamel fractures can lead to pulpal inflammation. For this reason, it is necessary to take great care when handling and using hydrogen peroxide bleaching agents, especially the higher concentrations.
- 1.5. The Poison Standard 2008 recognises hydrogen peroxide 3-6% as a Schedule 5 substance (Caution) and greater than 6% as a Schedule 6 (Poison). For carbamide peroxide 9-18% is classified as Schedule 5 and greater than 18% as Schedule 6.
- 1.6. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission prohibits the supply of home-use teeth whitening products which contain more than 6% hydrogen peroxide or more than 18% carbamide peroxide.
- 1.7. The Dental Board of Australia has developed an interim policy on Teeth Whitening/Bleaching which states that teeth whitening/bleaching is an irreversible procedure on the human teeth and any tooth bleaching/whitening products containing more than 6% concentration of the active whitening/bleaching agent should only be used by a dental practitioner with education, training and competence in teeth whitening/bleaching.
- 1.8. The application of heat and other forms of energy such as light from a plasma arc lamp or laser may accelerate the action of hydrogen peroxide, but the incorrect application of these forms of energy may also cause pulpal damage to the tooth and burns to adjacent soft tissues.

Definitions

- 1.9. BOARD is the Dental Board of Australia.
- 1.10. DENTAL PRACTITIONER is a person registered by the Board to provide dental care.
- 1.11. NATIONAL LAW is the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Acts 2009 as in force in each state and territory.

2. Principles

- 2.1. Any irreversible procedure performed in the oral cavity is the practice of dentistry.
- 2.2. Any bleaching procedure which causes an irreversible change in the teeth is the practice of dentistry.
- 2.3. National law prohibits the practice of dentistry by persons who are not registered as dental or medical practitioners.
- 2.4. Any bleaching agent for use on teeth that can cause irreversible changes should be regulated as a therapeutic agent.
- 2.5. Dental practitioners have the appropriate qualifications and expertise to assess treatment with teeth whiteners and the concentrations needed under their direct supervision or to prescribe courses of treatment to be self-administered without supervision.
- 2.6. A number of high power (Class 4) lasers are used for accelerating the whitening of teeth. Under the Radiation Safety legislation only dentists can use Class 4 lasers in patient care for “dental hard and soft tissue procedures”. The Radiation Safety legislation specifically excludes dental practitioners other than dentists and dental specialists from undertaking dental procedures with a Class 4 laser.

3. Position

- 3.1. Only dental practitioners who have been educated and trained in teeth whitening procedures and who are competent, should use teeth whitening (bleaching) agents incorporating hydrogen peroxide at concentrations exceeding 3% or carbamide peroxide exceeding 9%.
- 3.2. Under the guidance of a dentist, patients should be able to be provided with tooth whitening agents at concentrations of up to 20% hydrogen peroxide or equivalent for take home use.
- 3.3. The Board, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and other health authorities must take appropriate steps to protect consumers from the risks of unregistered and untrained providers of teeth whitening (bleaching).
- 3.4. The TGA should recognise that any dental bleaching agent with a hydrogen peroxide concentration exceeding 3% or a carbamide peroxide concentration exceeding 9% should be classified as a dental therapeutic agent.

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