

No room for complacency

RICHARD MUSGRAVE, discusses the importance of having an effective cleaning and decontamination programme.

WHILE there have been major advances in dentistry and indeed, general healthcare in the last 30 years, there has also been new dangers in the form of ever deadlier pathogens. Underestimating that threat and ignorance about the best anti-infection methods, however, is the biggest challenge to public health posed by such pathogens.

Since the 1980s and the emergence of HIV, followed by legionella, rotavirus, E. Coli and more recently MRSA and SARS, the public and healthcare professionals have been cruelly reminded that pathogens are constantly evolving and changing. Germs spread and cross borders easily; increased global travel, coupled with rapidly changing demographics, adds to the ever-present risk of infection. We have become adept at finding counter-measures to treat the symptoms but just as much (if not more) effort needs to go into fighting the causes of infection, making precautions and prevention essential.

Every surface in the dental practice is a potential home for microorganisms, where pathogens can rapidly multiply and spread infection. That means floors, units, work surfaces, furniture and equipment, regardless of whether they are in the clinical, patient or staff area, can become a threat.

An effective and thorough cleaning and decontamination programme, rigorously adhered to, is absolutely vital for dental practices. It is therefore very important that appropriate and sufficient training is given to all members of staff, including clinical and non-clinical staff as well as external contractors. Hygiene protocol also recommends that one member of the practice team is the lead on decontamination and all training,

with protocols and procedures well documented as evidence.

Because surfaces are particularly vulnerable to contamination, a systematic approach to their cleaning and infection control is crucial. The most effective anti-infection technique is "zoning". This is the first stage of surface decontamination, concentrating on clearly defined risk areas. Zoning involves the clear separation of contaminated and clean areas along with the allocation of dedicated space to "dirty" and "clean" instrument storage. The areas that must be included in zoning are:

- Dental chair and spittoon.
- Work surfaces.
- Controls/switches.
- Floors.

For the latter, it is important that floor coverings are non-slip and continuous. Ideally, floor coverings should continue about four inches up the wall to avoid the joins and cracks, which are particularly prone to bacterial contamination.

Carpets are ill-advised as floor coverings in a dental practice, even in non-surgical areas, because they are more difficult to clean and disinfect effectively. Also, vacuum cleaners spread tiny particles of possibly contaminated dust and matter into the air and around other parts of the building.

While it is acceptable and common practice to employ external cleaning contractors to clean public areas, it is vital that dental nurses take responsibility for cleaning treatment areas, as they will be more familiar with the units and equipment and so aware of any damage, defects or general wear and tear that could present a health hazard through the accumulation of bacteria.

A clearly understood, regular and systematic

procedure will be effective in the battle against the spread of infection and recommended protocols and should follow this guideline:

- Treat your patient and discard all disposable protection.
- Remove and discard all disposable end fittings from the suction unit.
- Disinfect the chair and hand controls.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces, chairs, spittoons and other risk areas.
- Add new disposable protections and fittings.
- Treat your last patient.
- Clean and disinfect all work surfaces, including those not visibly contaminated.
- Clean and disinfect surgery floors and always clean from the cleanest area towards the dirtiest!

It is imperative that the appropriate products are used to ensure effective cleaning and disinfectant – ideally a product that combines both. It is also important to use products that are suitable to the surfaces they are being used. The mikrozid cleaning and disinfectant range from schülke is a popular choice for such reasons and includes mikrozid AF liquid, mikrozid AF wipes, mikrozid sensitive liquid, mikrozid sensitive wipes and terralin protect.



About the author

Richard joined Schülke five years ago, bringing knowledge and experience gained over almost 20 years in the industry. He has been at the forefront of developing the company's infection control products and the highly acclaimed infection control training division.

