

DENTAL AMALGAM A NECESSARY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE OPTION

In a country where public dentistry is under resourced, for minor lobby groups to call for the banning of dental amalgam as a restorative material is irresponsible.

This call is made without regard to the safety or efficacy of amalgam's use in Australia. Curtailing its use will not lead to improved health nor will it have a measurable impact on the environment as worldwide dentistry only contributes to 0.1% of the world's mercury pollution. Without the availability of amalgam in situations where it would be the restorative material of choice, the ability of Australia's most needy to receive adequate and safe dental treatment would be put at risk.

Dental amalgam is a safe, cost-effective, easily-placed and predictable restorative dental material that has over 150 years of history. Its longevity against masticatory forces and resistance to abrasion are without question. While its use in contemporary dental practice in Australia is declining, it remains the restorative material of choice in many situations. Also of note, is that amalgam waste can be and is being predictably and easily collected and recycled.

However, in the case of alternative restorative materials when compared to amalgam, their safety, longevity, ease of placement and environmental credentials are either inferior or less defined and understood. In Australia, the use of dental amalgam in both public and private sector dentistry is decreasing due to a range of factors, including the patient's choice to request tooth-coloured materials such as composite resin or glass ionomer cement. However, in many situations these materials are not the most suitable restorative material.

The Australian Dental Association (ADA) is working closely with the profession, waste collectors and recyclers to ensure that amalgam waste is managed appropriately and thus dental amalgam will remain in the restorative armamentarium of the Australian dental profession. Dental clinics are encouraged to install amalgam separators which comply with ISO 11 143 to ensure amalgam waste is separated from water before entering the sewerage system, collected, transported and then recycled. Dentists are complying with this recommendation despite the increased cost to their practice. The other 50% of potential mercury release into the environment from dentistry comes from crematorium, and this avenue is being reduced by 99%.



An amalgam separator.

The ADA will continue to promote preventive measures to further reduce the demand for all restorative materials. These measures include water fluoridation and encouraging Australians to maintain a good diet and better oral hygiene practises such as regular toothbrushing.

In responding to the United Nations Environmental Programme Global Mercury Treaty, which seeks to eliminate mercury-containing products, the Australian government must continue to seek an exemption for dental amalgam. To remove it as a treatment option will have a significant impact, not only for Australians, but more so on the oral health of populations in countries less fortunate than ours.

Until more suitable alternative materials are available, dental amalgam will remain one of the most cost-effective and appropriate materials for dental restorations for many patients.

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