Whiter than white?

In light of new laws on tooth whitening, what are Irish businesses offering? ANN-MARIE HARDIMAN reports.

At the recent IDA Practice Management Seminar, Dr Tom Feeney’s presentation, ‘Tooth Whitening: The Legal Position’, updated delegates on new legislation regarding tooth-whitening products, which became law here on November 1, 2012.

Under Council Directive 2011/84/EU, tooth-whitening products that use between 0.1% and 6% hydrogen peroxide must have their first use within the dental office (by dental practitioners or under their direct supervision if an equivalent level of safety is ensured). Subsequent use can be performed by consumers themselves as long as access to the product is provided by dental practitioners or under their supervision. Products containing more than 6% hydrogen peroxide are not permitted, and treatment can only be carried out on persons aged 18 years or over. This is the first regulation of its kind in the EU and is now Irish law, but are tooth-whitening clinics complying with the new regulations? Dr Feeney highlighted a number of businesses that perform tooth whitening, and a quick check online reveals a large number of clinics offering “expert” tooth whitening either in a designated clinic or in the client’s own home. The Journal of the Irish Dental Association decided to contact four of these. In each case, we asked what was involved in the treatment, what was the content of the treatment gel used, and who would perform the treatment.

Business A

Business A offers customers tooth whitening in their own homes. The treatment is described as “SURROUND WHITE Cosmetic Teeth whitening … a cosmetic treatment which involves no elements of dentistry”. We were informed that a non-peroxide gel is used, in accordance with the law, along with a cold blue LED light. Two 25-minute treatments are carried out during the same one-hour session. Business A’s Facebook page clearly states that this is a non-peroxide treatment; however, the person we spoke to was unable to say what exactly was in the treatment gel, saying only that it was “natural” and “it’s what everyone else is using”.

Business B

Business B has clinics in Dublin, Galway, Cork and Belfast. The representative we spoke to explained that treatment involves a gel being placed on the teeth and then a cold blue laser light. The one-hour treatment involves a consultation and three 12-minute sessions one after the other. When we asked what was in the treatment, we were told that up to a few months ago they were using hydrogen peroxide, but that this was now banned (because it causes sensitivity). They are now using a “completely natural” gel that produces the same whitening results with no sensitivity. The representative was unable to say exactly what was in the gel, saying that she did not have the information in front of her. When asked a second time she said that the technician at the consultation would be able to explain more fully. She said that the clinic was staffed by dentists and dental nurses (“our technicians”), who perform all treatments, and emphasised that the company specialises in tooth whitening and does not carry out any other procedures.

Business C

Business C also has clinics around the country, with its head office in Dublin. They use 6% hydrogen peroxide gel with a high-intensity LED cold light. The person we spoke to said that clients would be seen by a dentist who specialised in teeth whitening, and emphasised the safety of the treatment, explaining that the equipment used was classified as a Class 1A medical device. He also explained that there was a possibility of short-term sensitivity with the gel, but no long-term side effects.

Business D

Finally, Business D, based in Dublin, carries out treatments on the upper and lower front teeth (the ‘smile’) with gel and light. We were assured that full information about the treatment was available on Business D’s website, but we were unable to find any information about the exact components of the gel used. According to the website: “We use a very gentle whitening gel in three sessions and thereby ensuring client safety and comfort. It is very uncommon to experience any discomfort, however in rare cases some clients may experience slight discomfort. This will quickly pass. It is also recommended that clients avoid consuming extremely hot or cold food or beverages for the first 24 hours following the treatment.” Treatment at Business D is carried out by dental technicians.

Dr Tom Feeney commented: “Council Directive 2011/84/EU states that each first cycle of use must be carried out by a dentist. Afterwards the product can be supplied to the consumer by the dentist. In the whitening ‘shops’ contacted by the JIDA the common denominator seems to be a reluctance to disclose the active ingredient. This, together with claims of rapid successful bleaching, would raise suspicions that higher concentration hydrogen peroxide is being used, although this remains to be proven. The competent authority for the regulation of tooth-whitening products is the Irish Medicines Board (IMB). If any member of the public, consumer or professional, has concerns about the possibility of illegal practice they should contact the IMB at cosmetics@imb.ie. The IMB’s role is the protection of the public and they will follow up any complaint made to them”.

Reflections

The new legislation regarding tooth-whitening products is the Irish Medicines Board (IMB). The Board’s role is the protection of the public and they will follow up any complaint made to them. It seems to be a reluctance to disclose the active ingredient. This, together with claims of rapid successful bleaching, would raise suspicions that higher concentration hydrogen peroxide is being used, although this remains to be proven. The competent authority for the regulation of tooth-whitening products is the Irish Medicines Board (IMB). If any member of the public, consumer or professional, has concerns about the possibility of illegal practice they should contact the IMB at cosmetics@imb.ie. The IMB’s role is the protection of the public and they will follow up any complaint made to them.

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