

Sustainability in Dental Practice – Sharing the responsibility

Elaine Tilling, TePe's Clinical Education and Project Manager

As professions, the medical and dental communities by necessity, use and encourage the use of single use items on a daily basis. These items often contain plastic because it is an inexpensive, safe and hygienic material to use. The disposal of this waste has, quite rightly become a major issue for us all as we all begin to understand that the disposal and breakdown of plastics in the environment is not quite as acceptable as we thought. The vast majority of medical and dental waste goes into landfill – sharps and hazardous waste are incinerated. On the plus side, roughly 50% of the resulting by-product of incineration can be re-used as energy or as ash filler for road making. Leaving 50% to go to landfill.

I would consider myself a responsible individual that cares for the environment – washing, reusing, recycling and disposing of items responsibly and according to our local waste management guidelines. But is this enough? Where does the journey for the non-biodegradable items end? On a beach? In the gullet of a whale? Who knew that our small but considered efforts to be responsible could have such a devastating effect on our planet? Putting the issues of blame and politics aside, what can we do about this now on both a personal and professional level?

Personal Responsibility

Personally, I can become more aware of what I need and purchase and how it is packaged (**Reduce**) and ensure that what I no longer need is sent to the charity shop (**Re-use**) and what cannot be put to good use, dispose of responsibly and hope that it is able to biodegrade to a level that will not harm the environment. Recycling products that are made up from more than one component is not yet an option in the UK as we do not have the facilities at the moment. But pragmatically, and to quote Meatloaf, "*2 out of three aint bad*". Every little helps. Our infrastructure in the UK for waste management is improving simply because it has to – we do need to be able to recycle essential everyday items like health & hygiene products such as toothbrushes and interdental brushes.

Professional Responsibility

Local governments and health authorities are all trying to play their part in putting environmental policies at the heart of decision making. The business world is also stepping up to the challenge. For us at TePe, our brand values are **health, knowledge and sustainable quality**. As a forward thinking company we have been ISO 14 001 accredited for several years now. The ISO 1400 'family' of standards seeks to ensure that organisations manage their environment responsibilities from labelling and packaging to environmental challenges such as climate change. Our plant in Sweden is the largest solar powered plant in Malmo with 100% of the energy used today coming from renewable sources.

We have been sourcing sustainable materials for some time and evaluating the effect of these materials on the quality and efficacy of our products. Like humans, nature balances itself by consuming and replacing energy. Sustainable practices and materials seek to reduce and replace a maximum of energy in nature and in turn reduce the impact on the planet's natural balance. We are absolutely committed to launching new products that meet the stringent high-quality standards required for an oral hygiene product whilst also having a minimal impact on our environment.

We are not there yet with our Interdental brush range, as plastic is a safe, hygienic material that is widely available and used throughout the health industry for those very reasons – the replacement options for plastics are limited and are in high demand but we are certainly committed to being a part of the solution to this problem. The TePe GOOD range is a good starting place. The TePe GOOD range uses a sustainable plant source for the plastic elements of the products – we appreciate that this is not the answer but it is a step in the right direction!

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And what about recycling?

We are currently trialling an in-practice recycling project in the UK with 100 dental practices. The TePe Environmental Recycling Initiative (TERI). This recycling pilot came about because we thought that there had to be a way to recycle products like interdental brushes using an existing system. We have placed bespoke sharps bins in each of the practices and encourage patients to bring back their used interdental brushes in a sealed bag and pop them into the bin. The bins are then collected alongside the practices normal contaminated and sharps waste and incinerated. This process produces energy for the grid and the resulting bottom ash is used to fill road surfaces. We can track and advise the individual practices just how much energy their bins have generated. The TERI project is due to complete in February this year and whilst it is not a final solution, we do believe that it is a small step in the right direction towards raising awareness of the need for more environmentally friendly waste options.

We hope to run a second phase of this project later this year – if you are interested in taking part in this initiative, please contact TePe info@tepe.com and ask to register for TERI II



How can practices encourage patients to get involved?

Useful tips work without lecturing, use the three R's - **Reduce**, **Recycle** and **Reuse!** - reminding patients to turn off the tap whilst brushing, using only the recommended amount of toothpaste and then squeezing the tube till the last drop of paste are simple but effective ways to 'Reduce'. Cut the heads from their used toothbrushes placing the head in the kitchen waste and 'Recycling' the handle in the plastic waste. Bring in their own cups for their mouth wash ... 'Reuse'. Or, go back to using a sterilisable cup for the mouthwash. All simple and doable steps.

How can practices share their commitment to the environment?

Use the practice notice board to advise their patients what environmentally friendly initiatives they are running in the practice – cycling to work, reducing paper/installing energy saving lights etc.. write a piece for the local paper. I think that any business that makes efforts to protect the environment should talk about it. The practice of medicine and dentistry generates enormous amounts of waste. For health and safety reasons, we have very few options to reduce the number of single use items, most of which contain plastics and so any move to negate these measures should be shouted about.

Check out the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare who offer training and practical advice on sustainable solutions for dental practice. Small steps.. long journey.

We all have a responsibility to the environment that we need to take seriously, at home certainly but also in our places of work and play.

Shared Responsibility for the three R's



GDC Learning Outcomes C and D

Aim:

This article provides some practical advice for improving sustainability in dental practice

LO:

- Be able to implement some simple changes to daily practice that can contribute to the sustainability of the business
- Offer practical advice to patients wishing to have more environmentally sensitive options for oral care