

Bleaching dilemma

At the end of January the issue of tooth bleaching was raised in an adjournment debate in the House of Commons. This had been arranged by dentist and Conservative MP, Sir Paul Beresford, who said he was 'trying to persuade the minister to help us sort out a situation that has been confusing dentists and trading standards officers throughout the UK for a considerable number of years.'

There are two issues about bleaching and two Government departments responsible. First, who should carry out this procedure? The General Dental Council believes that it is illegal for non-dental professionals to be offering tooth whitening treatment. They advise any member of the public wanting tooth whitening to speak to their dentist. In their view tooth whitening amounts to the practice of dentistry and if non-registrants offer it this amounts to a criminal offence. This position has been accepted by the health secretary for England.

The other issue that Sir Paul raised in the debate was the European cosmetics directive. This restricts the sale of tooth-bleaching materials containing more than 0.1 per cent hydrogen peroxide, a concentration that he described from the dental point of view as 'absolutely useless'. He also pointed out that enforcement of this directive is in the hands of Local Government trading standards officers but most of these are too busy to bother dentists. Unfortunately, he said, there are a few trading standards officers who continue to threaten to prosecute dentists for using too high a concentration. Replying to the debate was a minister from the trade, development and consumer affairs department, Gareth Thomas. He said that an amending directive was under consideration which would allow tooth-whitening products containing up to six per cent hydrogen peroxide to be available to consumers after 'assessment and first application by a dental practitioner'. Products containing more than six per cent hydrogen peroxide would only be for use by dental practitioners and should not be used on children under 18. Tooth-whitening is popular with patients, even in times of recession; indeed it is rumoured that the Prime Minister himself has availed himself of the procedure. But the concentrations used in most practices are above that allowed by law. Trading standards officers are obliged to enforce UK law, even though they have been urged to adopt a 'low-key' approach. The minister said the UK was pressing for reform of the EU directive and hoped that a positive outcome would emerge shortly. The current situation is plainly unsatisfactory, but Brussels has little grasp of the concept of urgent. The profession and our patients should, however, be grateful to Sir Paul Beresford for bringing this issue to the House of Commons. •