

SmileDirectClub collapse confirms the risks to patients of remote orthodontics

The British Dental Association (BDA) has warned that the collapse of remote-orthodontic giant SmileDirectClub will not close the door on the clear risks to patients presented by remote orthodontics.

The business model – offering patients plastic aligners based on a 3D scan of their mouths or via an impression taken from at-home moulding kits – can lead to fundamental changes to a patient's mouth that may be irreversible.

The BDA has regularly raised concerns directly with regulators the Care Quality Commission and General Dental Council about this practice since 2019. The professional body warn that the bankruptcy of the market leader should not be viewed as a substitute for meaningful regulation to protect patients.

In 2021, the GDC published guidelines, stressing that orthodontic patients need to be fully assessed by a dentist, that direct dentist-to-patient interaction – the basis for informed consent – is essential, and that patients must know the name and registration number of the dentist responsible for their care. However, it did not offer any clarity on what sanctions it might

utilise and how the regulator backed up its assumption that such models of care are 'safe for many people'.

Dentists have stressed the risk of misdiagnosis and lack of informed consent in the absence of face-to-face consultations throughout the course of treatment. The BDA has seen cases of patients with advanced gum disease that have been provided with these aligners, potentially leading to tooth loss.

In 2020, an investigation into the provider by US network NBC revealed a wide range of complaints on treatment outcomes. Patients were not required to have any in-person assessment with a dentist, and unhappy customers were made to sign non-disclosure agreements.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'Dentists are left to pick up the pieces when these providers offer wholly inappropriate treatment. It shouldn't have taken a bankruptcy to protect patients from harm. It requires decent laws and effective regulation. Sooner or later, someone will find a way to make remote orthodontics turn a profit. Before that time proper safeguards must be in place.'

Charity voices concern as SmileDirectClub closure leaves patients in the lurch

The Oral Health Foundation has raised alarms over the closure of SmileDirectClub, leaving a significant number of patients in a precarious position. The charity believes the abrupt closure of the direct-to-consumer aligner company has left patients uncertain about the continuity of their dental care and orthodontic treatments.

The Oral Health Foundation is concerned by the potential consequences of patients being left without proper guidance and support midway through treatment plans. The charity is also deeply troubled by the financial impact of patients being abandoned, with many having paid out thousands of pounds.

Dr Nigel Carter, Chief Executive of the Oral Health Foundation, said: 'The closure of SmileDirectClub has created an upsetting situation for many patients who were undergoing dental treatments. We are extremely worried about what impact this will have on the oral health and mental wellbeing of thousands of people currently undergoing treatment.'

'Our hearts go out to the patients who placed their trust in SmileDirectClub. The sense of abandonment they now face is truly distressing.'

'It is infuriating to see patients left out in the cold, ripped off, and left out of pocket. The financial losses some patients might now incur are inexcusable, and it's a stark reminder of the consequences when companies prioritise profits over the wellbeing of those they serve.'

SmileDirectClub initiated Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings in September, citing a substantial debt of more than £700 million.

Despite an extensive search spanning several months, the company disclosed in early December that it was unsuccessful in securing a partner willing to inject sufficient capital to sustain its operations.

Upon its initial public offering in 2019, SmileDirectClub commanded a valuation of approximately £7 billion. However, the company experienced a significant decline in stock value over subsequent years, grappling with persistent financial losses and with legal challenges.

In the fiscal year 2022, SmileDirectClub reported a notable loss of almost £70 million.

The Oral Health Foundation has previously expressed concerns about the remote provision of plastic aligners, citing concerns about the potential risks of misdiagnosis. These concerns were communicated to the regulatory authorities.

In 2021, the charity launched Safe Smiles, a campaign to help patients make safer choices when it comes to their dental treatment. The campaign stresses the importance of having dental treatment in dental practices and the benefits of it being carried out by trained and registered professionals. Receiving overwhelming endorsement across the dental industry, the campaign was a response to concerns to the growth of direct-to-consumer alternatives, with the charity worried about more patients potentially being in danger.

Patients looking for advice about seeking orthodontic treatment should visit www.dentalhealth.org/safe-smiles-seeing-a-dental-professional.