

# Long gone silver

By Sharif Islam, a dentist in London, UK

They've been saying it's going to happen for as long as I've been a dentist (since yesterday) but now it seems the date has been set, and sooner than expected. The European Parliament has voted to ban the production and export of dental amalgam from the start of the next year.

Despite having exited the EU, this ban will still have cost and supply implications for most of dentistry practised across the United Kingdom. And while we may complain that this is happening too soon and will diminish essential munitions for an already wilted dental provision across the country, we have frankly known this was in the pipeline for years and have had ample time to prepare.

To some observers our use of dental amalgam, as trusted and perennial as it has been, is long out of date. On the other side of the Atlantic, many practitioners cannot believe that we still put an alloy of silver and tin into people's teeth, or that patients actually accept it. Over two decades ago, one of the first questions I was asked at a practice in New York was if we still used amalgam over here. Yes, we do, and incredibly our patients still manage not to set off the metal detectors in your airports and schools.

And it is a useful material. Especially when trying to restore that

distal cavity in the upper wisdom tooth, whose buccal inclination and saturation in parotid saliva negates the use of a resin-based material. And what about the glorious Nayyar Core? Compacting a block of metal into the brittle structure of a root-filled tooth is proven for providing a bacterial seal, if not so much for preventing fracture. Amalgam is also gleefully consanguineous, marrying to itself extremely well on those conservative occasions when you only need to remove a small amount of the old filling to access the caries. And for larger cavities it makes an effective bulk filler, such that some dentists allegedly just press it in with their thumb (not you, surely?).

But agreed, in most cases there is little that a slab of metal occupying a bottle-necked space can do better than the latest resin materials. The use of amalgam has certainly experienced a steady decline in the past few decades as a more image-conscious population seek more aesthetic restorations.

Except now those poor NHS dentists won't be able to sell such aesthetic alternatives to the amalgam. After all, you need to offer something worse to promote something better, don't you? To say nothing of the majority of their restorative work using amalgam as the primary material. If the consensus is that NHS dentistry is presently an illusory concept, that the NHS practice you thought you saw was merely a mirage in a fever dream, how much less dentistry will be offered once amalgam is in short supply? If NHS practitioners are compelled to use more expensive, technique sensitive and time-consuming resin alternatives it will be another welcome excuse for them to do even less government work.

But the really bizarre aspect to an amalgam ban is the rationale given for it, namely that it presents an environmental hazard in its disposal. It has apparently been fit for humans in the past 150 years to carry around in their living mouths but heaven forbid we release it to the planet. And yet, by the same European peers, we're all being encouraged to transition to electric vehicles loaded with masses of lithium and cadmium, which no one has yet worked out how to properly dispose of. It's perfectly acceptable to destroy the Earth's crust and its deep marine ecosystems by mining for precious metals to build these vehicles but the use of amalgam is a heinous crime that will probably lead to a custodial sentence when someone opens their mouth at their next dental exam. Agendas leading the science rather than the other way around, perhaps.

Alas, poor amalgam, we knew it well. Always getting a bad rap after a good burnish and now banned with extreme prejudice. You darkened our smiles, fractured our cusps and poisoned the ground, and this is how we repaid you. And, as with all agenda-based decisions, we've unwittingly created a marketplace. Limited supply will mean inevitable hoarding before higher prices. Believe me, I'm buying my shares in silver and tin after I finish writing this. After all, every cloud etc... Maybe, in the fullness of time, amalgam will become so expensive that patients will actually ask for it as a luxury item, an alternative to that gold veneer on an upper lateral as a symbol of wealth.

But probably not. ■

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