

THE TROUBLE WITH GUIDELINES

Sir, as a dental student five years ago, when questioned about wisdom teeth removal my response was to quote the NICE guidelines. I was just grateful to be asked an easy question! Visits to overseas dental facilities in recent years, however, have helped me delve deeper into the subject and question this UK convention.

Firstly, I must congratulate the *BDJ* for publishing the recent Mansoor *et al.* article which claimed: 'The NICE guidance on wisdom teeth published in 2000 clearly stated that they had "no" research evidence to support their recommendations'.¹

Indeed upon reviewing the guidelines, no peer-reviewed articles, clinical trials and so forth are referred to. The guidelines do, however, take the opinions of dentists and dental institutes into account.²

The problem with opinions more often than not is that you will find somebody that has a directly opposite one. According to the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons' (AAOMS') press release from 2010, retaining your seemingly innocent asymptomatic wisdom teeth may well be killing you and harming your unborn child by leading to 'cardiovascular disease and preterm birth'.³

In fact, studies by AAOMS strongly recommend prophylactic removal of wisdom teeth.⁴

It is certainly odd that that AAOMS display such vitriol and contempt towards wisdom teeth, whereas NICE have an alternative view. It is of course speculation to question why there is such a difference, but health economics (make or save money, depending on which side of the Atlantic you're from) may well be playing a role here.

NICE does hasten to point out that: 'This guidance does not, however, override the individual responsibility of health professionals to make the appropriate decisions in the circumstances of the individual patient'.²

Ultimately the decision to extract wisdom teeth should not be based solely on guidelines (NICE or otherwise), especially guidelines where you can quite easily find an alternative reasonable (albeit American) stand-point.

UK dentists may be worried that by not following UK guidelines they may be open to claims of negligence, however, as evidenced by the Bolam test, the AAOMS would appear to be a responsible body of medical opinion, and as the law takes no account of geographical boundaries of medical opinion it does seem inconceivable to be negligent on this basis alone.⁵

At worst, our (over)reliance upon NICE guidelines may be having the corrosive effect of blunting the debate surrounding wisdom teeth removal in the UK. Certainly, this is a convention that deserves debate and questioning. Unfortunately, as it turns out, the answer to my question is anything but easy.

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1. Mansoor J, Jowett A, Coulthard P. NICE or not so NICE? *Br Dent J* 2013; **215**: 209–212.
2. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Guidance on wisdom teeth removal [TA01]. London: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2004.
3. American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons. *Conventional wisdom about wisdom teeth confirmed*. 2010. Online article available at www.aaoms.org/docs/media/third_molars/press_release.pdf (accessed December 2013).
4. American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons. *Wisdom teeth*. 2010. Online article available at www.aaoms.org/docs/media/third_molars/wisdomteeth.pdf (accessed January 2014).
5. Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee [1957] 1, 582. Weekly Law Report, Queen's Bench division.

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judgement should be owned by the clinician and should be measured in terms of the collective outcomes achieved by that clinician. However, collective outcomes for GDPs' judgements are not routinely considered by dental professionals. Compliance with process is valued both by dental professionals and lawyers. Guidelines are therefore important documents in legal situations.

The variance associated with human decisions places the GDP in a difficult position if ownership is taken and then challenged retrospectively based on published guidelines. Has the time

come for all dentists and particularly those responsible for the development of guidelines to consider the words of Ayer *et al.*?¹ 'Nowadays, people are very aware of their rights and laws involving any wrong done to them. Sometimes people misuse these rights to sue the dentist for wrong reasons also and for no mistake of the dentist.'

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By email

1. Ayer N, Bali A, Ahluwalia S S, Kaur S. Lawsuit and the dental profession. *Unique J Med Dent Sci* 2013; **1**: 17–20.

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