

Cheap dental crowns from China may contain dangerous levels of LEAD

By DAVID DERBYSHIRE and LIZ HAZELTON - Last updated at 00:00am on 8th March 2008



Dental experts say the crowns can contain dangerous levels of lead. Dentists who use cut-price and potentially deadly crowns and dentures from China are putting their patients at risk, it was claimed today. The products are often made in unregulated laboratories and can contain dangerous levels of lead, dental experts warned.

In the U.S., four cases of lead poisoning have been linked to Chinese dental fixtures. A laboratory test revealed that some contained 210 times the acceptable amount of the toxic metal. Richard Daniels, the chief executive of the Dental Laboratories Association, said the number of potentially dangerous imports was rising. "At this point nobody knows what the health risks are," he said. "The fact is the majority of NHS work will be coming from China or India in the next five years. We need to be moving towards proper regulation of the industry.

"It's not just a matter for the NHS either - many of the big corporate groups also have agreements with factories in China to make their fixtures."

Fears over the toxic metal content of crowns, veneers, bridges and dentures were raised when a 73-year-old Ohio woman became sick after being given a new crown made in China. Subsequent tests on other Chinese crowns revealed that some had dangerous levels of lead, forcing the U.S. National Association of Dental Laboratories to issue a warning to patients.

Dangerous crowns and dentures have yet to be reported in Britain. However, there has recently been a huge surge in the number of dental fixtures imported from China into the UK. These now make up five per cent of the market, compared with less than one per cent three years ago.

There have been concerns about other products made in the country, which is widely regarded as an emerging economic powerhouse. Last year, toy manufacturer Mattel launched a massive product recall after some of its products made in China were found to have high levels of lead.

David Smith, a board member of the Association, said: "The worst case scenario is we'll end up with a large number of people in the UK with mouths full of lead and they've got no idea that that's the case. It's a ridiculous situation. Mattel could simply pull its toys off the shelves when they realised there was a problem. It's nowhere near as simple if the contaminated product is a dental fixture in someone's mouth. In theory what happened in America should never happen here as there are regulatory bodies which should prevent these problems in the UK. But the truth is, if the situation isn't addressed then it is only a matter of time before there is a similar case as in the States. We've watered down all the rules in such a way that you could drive a bus through them. In the end, the whole system is profiteering. Any savings made by outsourcing the work to China are never passed on to the patient."

British dentists can now take an impression of a patient's tooth, send it to a Chinese lab by express post and get a crown back within four days. Suppliers of imported fixtures ask for around £10 per crown, compared to the £100 fee charged by British labs. The cost of a crown on the NHS is around £193.

Medical devices in this country are tightly regulated, but the supply of dental fixtures is harder to control. Although the materials used to make crowns, bridges and dentures must carry a CE safety mark, there is no way of checking whether the manufacturer has used the correct materials.

Mr Daniel said: "A British laboratory gets routine, unannounced inspections, but outside the EU no one is checking to see what is going into these products."