Foam swabs – why they’re banned in Wales

Foam swabs for oral care were banned in Wales in 2012 - partly following a serious patient safety incident, but also as part of a planned move to introduce new national oral health and hygiene care standards in hospitals in Wales. The ban includes foam swabs in all colours, and extends to any oral cleaning device with foam on the head. We do not intend to re-introduce foam mouth swabs as alternative approaches to mouth care are considered to be safer and more effective. Their use is the subject of an MHRA alert – initially issued in 2008 and revised in 2012.

The decision to ban foam swabs was made taking into account a range of concerns raised by nurses and dental teams including the following-

Foam swabs are not designed to remove plaque from teeth and we want to ensure that effective methods are used for good oral hygiene. Most usually this is a small headed toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste, although aspirating brushes are also in use.

We had ongoing concerns about the safety of foam swabs. National Patient Safety Agency data collected between 2008 (issue of first MHRA alert) and 2012 shows that a total of 803 incidents were reported of which 113 relevant incidents were identified. These incidents relate to dislodging and tearing of foam heads resulting in pieces of foam being retained in the mouth and / or entrance to the airway. Most reports describe that the sponge just came off in the patient’s mouth, and some explicitly state that the sponge had not been left soaking in fluid before use. A few incidents describe patients biting down on the sponge.

We are aware that foam swabs were usually used to moisten the mouth and wipe debris from the oral mucosa. However it is clear that this can lead to detachment of the foam head and the 2008 MHRA alert warned users “not to soak the oral swab in liquid”. The subsequent 2012 alert reinforced this advice but also stated “if required moisten the swab immediately before use”. We believe it is not easy to distinguish between moist and soaking – especially during a busy ward session. The swabs were most usually used for infirm patients, many of whom are not able to fully co-operate with care givers. The 2012 alert states “if the patient is likely to bite the swab consider using an alternative such as a small headed toothbrush”. There is a range of safe and effective ways to moisten a patient’s mouth, and we are promoting use of these methods

In Wales we are introducing a national programme to improve mouthcare for adult patients in hospital as part of 1000 Lives Plus service improvement programme. This focuses on safe and effective mouthcare using a range of evidence based resources, supported by staff training. Incidentally one of our hospitals voluntarily banned the use of foam swabs 15 years ago in favour of toothbrushes.

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