Hearing loss in the dental office: The effects of high speed dental drills on dentists' hearing

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INTRODUCTION

The earliest dental drills date from ancient Egypt, approximately 9,000 years ago. Scottish inventor James Nasmyth used a coiled wire spring drill in 1829. The first air-driven drill was introduced in 1868 by American George Green. Plug-in electric drills became available in 1908. Each of these developments increased the speed of the drill, and today’s high speed dental drills have a rotational speed of 300,000-400,000 r.p.m. (Hyson, 2002). They sound like high-pitched sirens (Wilson et al., 1990) with the spectrum covering mostly the frequency range from 5 to 10 kHz, and the overall level reaching up to 100 dBA. Temporary hearing loss may occur after a 6-hour common workday (Bali et al., 2007). Permanent hearing loss starts to develop after five years of practicing (Gibelts et al., 2006). Many dental professionals are unaware of the potentially hazardous consequences of noise exposure and it is very rare for any of them to wear hearing protection.

Purpose

The study had two purposes: 1. to determine whether dentists experience a temporary threshold shift (TTS) after a common workday in the dental office, and 2. to determine whether ear protection would reduce or eliminate the shift.

METHODS

Participants

Twenty-two (2 females, 20 males) actively-practicing dentists (practice time 5 months to 32 years); age range from 18 to 65 years. Participants were selected based on their hearing thresholds: 35 dB HL or better across frequency range 250-8000 Hz. Participants were divided into two groups:

1) According to OSHA guidelines, employees must use hearing protection when an 8-hour time-weighted average exceeds 85 dBA. However, because some dentists may experience a TTS with exposures well below that average, the Dental Research Center should consider revising those noise exposure guidelines for dental professionals.

2) TTS produced by dental drilling may lead to permanent hearing loss.

3) Routine hearing evaluation and use of hearing protection is recommended.

4) Adoption of electric dental hand-pieces will likely not solve the noise exposure problem, since the high-speed suction was often as intense as the dental hand-piece.

5) Group audiometric data do not reveal a statistically significant TTS. However, some individual data revealed susceptibility to the noise; as we cannot predict susceptibility, all dentists should be encouraged to use hearing protection.

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