

# 'Amalgam-free' dental practices: are they ethical?

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## PEER REVIEW/ETHICS

### **'Amalgam-Free' Dental Practices: Are They Ethical?**

Question: Is it ethically possible for me to have an amalgam-free dental practice and still remain a member of both the ADA and MDA?

Answer: Both the ADA and the MDA constantly remind members that they have an ethical obligation to discuss all treatment options, including restorative material options, with patients, always being mindful to base those discussions on valid scientific evidence and standards of care. Section 1.A, Patient Involvement, of the *ADA/MDA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct* states, "The dentist should inform the patient of the proposed treatment, and any reasonable alternatives, in a manner that allows the patient to become involved in the treatment decisions."

Perhaps you as a clinician have made the decision to not use dental amalgam as a restorative material for your patients. That's fine. As long as you have discussed all options, including amalgam (if applicable), and both you and your patient are satisfied that your other restorative material options are clinically acceptable for their restorative needs and in their best interest, you can proceed.

The words "best interest" can't be stressed enough. The *Combined Codes* state in Section 3, Beneficence, that "the dentist's primary obligation is service to the patient and the public-at-large. The most important aspect of this obligation is the competent and timely delivery of dental care within the bounds of clinical circumstances presented by the patient, with due consideration being given to the needs, desires and values of the patient."

What you cannot do, however, is state or suggest that dental amalgam is somehow toxic or unsafe as a proper restorative option. This is where the *Code's* Section 5, Principle: Veracity comes into play. This states "The dentist has a duty to communicate truthfully." It also affirms that dentists shall not represent the care being rendered to their patients in a false and misleading manner. The fact that amalgam contains mercury is disturbing to some patients and dentists alike, and the ADA and MDA firmly believe members should always remain skeptical of established treatment modalities. Nevertheless, studies of amalgam are ongoing and the latest review of the literature by the ADA's Council on Scientific Affairs reaffirms the safety and efficacy of amalgam as a restorative material. Additionally, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's most current decision categorizes dental amalgam as a Class II (moderate risk) substance in the same class as gold and resin-based composite restorations. As of now, there is no credible, valid scientific evidence that dental amalgam harms humans

other than those that might be allergic to its contents. To suggest otherwise is not true and, therefore, unethical.

The ADA feels so strongly about this that it has included two additional Advisory Opinions or interpretations of the *Code* under this Section to provide further guidance:

**5.A.1. Dental Amalgam and Other Restorative Materials.** Based on current scientific data the ADA has determined that the removal of amalgam restorations from the non-allergic patient for the alleged purpose of removing toxic substances from the body, when such treatment is performed solely at the recommendation or suggestion of the dentist, is improper and unethical. The same principle of veracity applies to the dentist's recommendation concerning the removal of any dental restorative material.

**5.A.2. Unsubstantiated Representations.** A dentist who represents that dental treatment or diagnostic techniques recommended or performed by the dentist has the capacity to diagnose, cure or alleviate diseases, infections or other conditions, when such representations are not based upon accepted scientific knowledge or research, is acting unethically.

The *Codes* couldn't be clearer. As a clinician you have a variety of proven, safe and effective restorative options available to you. Amalgam is simply one of them. Should you choose to eliminate dental amalgam from your restorative choices for whatever reason -- color, metallic nature, personal preference, etc, and use another acceptable alternative, that's fine. You just can't suggest something that isn't scientifically true. That would be unethical.

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