HK takes first step to regulate dental bleaching

HONG KONG: The government in Hong Kong has proposed new legislation that would make it illegal for beauticians to perform dental bleaching and other cosmetic procedures classified as high-risk medical procedures. In the new guidelines under the Medical Registration Ordinance, only officially registered dentists and physicians would be permitted to do so, representatives of the Food and Health Bureau announced.

In addition to tooth whitening, the legislation would apply to Botox injections, chemical exfoliation and hyperbaric oxygen therapy. It is expected to come into effect in a few months from now once it has been accepted by a Legislative Council panel.

Cosmetic procedures offered at beauty spas and salons have become a thriving business in China’s Special Administrative Region, which has raised concerns about the safety of risky procedures undertaken by non-professionals. Several incidences have occurred in the recent past, including the death of a 46-year-old woman who had undergone blood transfusion therapy at a DR beauty centre in the Causeway Bay area last autumn. Since then, professional organisations like the Hong Kong Dental Association have repeatedly urged the government to address loopholes in current regulations that allow non-professionals to perform procedures that could potentially harm patients’ health or place their lives at risk.

“Tooth whitening is a chemical procedure that can cause irreversible damage to human teeth if handled improperly,” council member, Dr Alfred Yung, told the newspaper South China Morning Post earlier in July. “Intra-oral treatment and dental procedures like tooth bleaching provided by non-dental or non-clinical professionals therefore pose a threat to public health and should be banned.”

With the proposed guidelines, Hong Kong is following other countries in the region that revamped their tooth-whitening regulations. New Zealand, for example, recently restricted over-the-counter sale of tooth-whitening products with a high concentration of hydrogen peroxide. Earlier this year, Australia also changed its poison standard to stop the sale of tooth-whitening products containing more than 6 per cent of the harmful chemical in retail stores and pharmacies.

Five thousand too few

Malaysia’s health minister, Datin Seri Dr Subramaniam s/o K.V. Sathasivam, has recently admitted that his country will need to produce twice as many dentists as it currently has to achieve its target dentist-patient ratio of 1 to 5,000 by 2020. Although boasting slightly over 4,500 dentists, he said that Malaysia’s oral health-care workforce is largely inadequate to serve the country’s population of almost 30 million.

In order to address the shortage, his ministry will continue to collaborate with universities and dental schools nationwide to encourage more young people to pursue a career in dentistry. As a result, the intake of new dental students has already risen from 515 to 1,015 this year, Sathasivam said. He added that over 1,000 more students are expected to enrol for studies in dentistry next year.

The figures were presented at an oral health promotion event in the capital Kuala Lumpur in October.