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\$500,000 scandal of faulty dental tools

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Medical instruments which cost the Government \$350,000 have failed to work, jeopardising the University of Hongkong's dental teaching programme.

The Government is now faced with the prospect of spending another \$500,000 to replace the sophisticated instruments because inflation has boosted prices.

A legal battle involving the Government and the supplier is also looming.

Teaching staff have warned that the instruments are urgently needed.

The faculty has been doing without them for months — and this has already hit parts of the student programme.

But despite the urgency, the Government

has not yet told the HKU when it can expect the tools.

And officials are also refusing to shed any light on the matter.

In response to a series of questions by the SCM Post, a Government spokesman would only say:

"Legal advice relating to certain matters concerning the supply of equipment is being sought and it is accordingly inappropriate to comment."

The instruments in question are known as dental welders. They are needed to fuse braces and other metal parts used in dentistry.

The Government bought them for use at the Prince Philip Dental Hospital, which opened in 1981 to form the HKU's dental

faculty.

But all 49 of the welders were removed from the teaching school some months ago when they failed to perform satisfactorily.

The Government is unwilling to say where the welders are now and hospital staff insist they do not know the whereabouts of the instruments.

SCM Post sources, however, say the welders are no longer in Hongkong.

It is understood that they are being held pending possible legal action involving copyright laws.

A lawyer from the Legal Department, Mr R. Osborne, is also interviewing staff members at the dental teaching hospital in preparation for possible legal action involving the welders and other equipment.

The problem with the welders started when hospital staff experienced difficulties with them and sent one back to a British firm, thought to have manufactured the instruments, and asked for an explanation.

But the firm said it had not manufactured the welders although it said the design was similar to theirs.

The firm is now understood to be determining if there could have been a breach of copyright.

Staff members of the Prince Philip Dental Hospital — which was recently the target of a corruption investigation — say the teaching programme involving dental welders has already been delayed and cannot be pushed back much longer.

"Ideally, we need them now," one source said.

There is only 18 months to go before the first batch of students graduate and although they are now in their third year they have not yet been able to train with the welders.

Sources say at least 30 are needed now while all 49 will be needed by next year.

Teaching staff have in the meantime borrowed two welders from the Hongkong Polytechnic and have also been making do with other types of welders now available at the dental school.

The welders are not the only instruments that have been causing problems at the hospital.

Following concern expressed by the Board of Governors of the hospital two months ago, the chairman, Miss Lydia Dunn, asked the Government to investigate the safety of equipment being used.

A four-man team of Government experts assembled to carry out the equipment probe unearthed a number of faults.

It recommended spending \$700,000 to remedy a range of equipment being used at the hospital and this was accepted by the Government.

But the team did not examine the 49 welders because they had already been removed from the hospital at the time of their inquiries.