

Action over dentist with HIV

By FIONA CHAN

THE Hongkong Dental Association yesterday called for new guidelines for health workers following reports that a dentist practising in Hongkong was an HIV carrier.

The latest issue of *The Peak* magazine reported that the British-trained man, who is a homosexual in his early 40s, admitted that 70 per cent of his immune system had already been destroyed.

He had continued to work despite a positive HIV test last May and had not told his patients although his health had deteriorated since he was diagnosed and he would soon reach the threshold of having full-blown AIDS.

He told *The Peak* that he had not been surprised when he found he had the virus as his younger Chinese boyfriend had tested HIV positive more than a year earlier.

A spokesman for the 1,000-strong Hongkong Dental Association, Dr Joseph Chan Cho-ye, said the revelation highlighted the importance of establishing guidelines for health workers who contracted AIDS.

"All health care professions will have members with HIV. It is just a matter of time," he said.

Health professionals had been holding an ongoing dialogue with officials on a government advisory committee on AIDS, but Dr Chan said it was a good time to further explore the issue.

There was an obligation for any professional to inform his client that he had tested positive.

Dr Chan said he had no idea how many members of his association were HIV carriers.

Continuous reviews had been done to protect dentists from being

infected by patients or patients by dentists, he said.

The association in March circulated a new set of infection control guidelines to safeguard people from all contagious diseases, including AIDS and hepatitis.

But the procedures, now in use in the United States, including the use of disposable sterilisation masks, gloves and eye protection for medics, could at best only minimise the risk, Dr Chan said.

He said the Department of Health had guidelines on AIDS to all health professionals.

Dr Chan suggested a dentist could continue to practise as long as he took proper precautions but should inform patients first.

Asked if it would be sufficient to rely on the goodwill of individual dentists, Dr Chan said it could not be enforced by legislation and patients

had to trust health care professionals.

"I think we should educate patients not to discriminate and show the level of risk by scientific evidence," he said.

Spokesman and vice-president of the 4,000-strong Hongkong Medical Association, Dr Lee Kin Hung, said no survey had been done among its members to show the number of HIV carriers.

But guidelines have been circulated to ask doctors to consult with their colleagues and their own specialists if they were found to be HIV positive.

Dr Lee said it would not step up warnings among members as it would make the public panic.

HIV carriers could practise if no surgery was involved but a surgeon would be "very likely to give up his job", he said.