

Salon uses industrial bleach to whiten teeth

By Celia Hall, Medical Editor

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An industrial bleaching agent was used to whiten the teeth of a young woman, it emerged yesterday.

The case of 23-year-old Stephanie Ramezan who, two days after her teeth were treated with chlorine dioxide found they were browner than they had been before, led to a warning to beware treatments by unqualified therapists.

Chlorine dioxide is a powerful, acidic disinfectant used to combat Legionnaire's disease and to purify water. It is also used in the food industry.

The British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry is alarmed at the growing practice of beauty salons offering teeth whitening at the hands of people not trained in dentistry.

"We are seeing many cases of people who, driven either by convenience or cheap pricing, choose to have their teeth whitened at local salons or spas," said Dr Christopher Orr, the president of the academy.

"Not only are the treatments performed by non-dentists, but some of these chemicals aren't accepted material for this cosmetic use and could cause considerable harm."

Early last month Miss Ramezan, who works in the City, found an "extremely professional" website advertising whitening at a reasonable price. "It was £200 and I was concerned that it was so cheap but when I asked why they told me it was a special January offer," she said. "I suppose I was naive in not thinking of going to a dentist."

All went well. She was warned that the effect might fade a little the next day but the day after that she thought her teeth looked darker.

Fortunately, Miss Ramezan had taken photographs and could show the change in the colour of her teeth. She contacted or called at the clinic daily for the next four days to get her money back and in the meantime saw a dentist who started restoration work.

"I think now I should have asked them for more to help to pay for the dentistry I now have to have," she said. "I was shocked at how unprofessional they were. Even the beauticians recognised that my teeth looked darker but no one seemed to know what to do about it."

Her dentist, Oliver Harman, said the surface of her teeth had been damaged. "What immediately worried me is that they seem to have used strong chemicals that include orthophosphoric acid, which is what dentists use to dissolve enamel when bonding fillings.

"They hadn't even bothered to scrape the plaque of Stephanie's teeth before bleaching which is common practice for an even finish."

The British Dental Association said it could find no published evidence to support the use of chlorine dioxide as a tooth whitener.

And the General Dental Council said that under the Dentist Act 1984 it was a criminal offence for anyone who was not a registered dentist or dental care professional, such as a hygienist, to practice dentistry.

Last October it successfully prosecuted a man who had carried out a tooth whitening procedure "for the illegal practice of dentistry".

Hew Mathewson, the president of the council, said: "Tooth whitening can be dangerous, particularly in the hands of unregistered professionals."

Stuart Johnston, of the British Dental Association, said he had carried full search of the literature looking for support for the use of chlorine dioxide as a whitening agent. "I found nothing. It is extremely acidic."

He added: "Whitening is part of a full process. A dentist will look at the whole mouth and produce a treatment plan. We are fully responsible for the care we provide and should there be a problem we have proper indemnity."