In the wake of a recent Food and Drug Administration warning about the use of electric handpieces, dentists nationwide are urged to maintain their devices regularly and according to manufacturers’ recommendations.

“In the last few years we have heard about electric handpieces that have burned patients,” said Ron Appel, vice president and general manager of the Henry Schein’s Repair Business Group. “However we are not aware of any significant instances where this occurred with our repair customers.”

He is quick to add that: “The primary reason is unfamiliarity with how critical it is to properly maintain electric handpieces, as most U.S. dentists are accustomed to air-driven models. Also with many dentists not being trained on it in school adds to the potential risk.

“We believe we can help by offering a certification program, which allows dentists to send their electrics to us so we can certify that they are running to the correct specifications.

“Therefore the chance of the head heating up and burning the patient will be dramatically reduced. Proper maintenance of the handpiece combined with periodic certification will reduce the possibility of patient burns.”

Appel said that for many dentists, the handpiece is “the heart and soul of dentistry.”

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Diagnostic procedures that expose dental patients to small amounts of radiation are generally safe and their benefits usually outweigh their risks. Dangers from diagnostic procedures also are decreasing as those technologies evolve. Nevertheless, dentists need to exercise caution when exposing patients to X-rays.

Mark S. Wolff, DDS, PhD, professor and chair, department of endodontics and comprehensive care at New York University College of Dentistry, says that whenever ionizing radiation is used, there is some risk to patients.

“The risk may be small, but there is a risk,” he says.

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