

Surgeons and dentists with HIV to be allowed to operate on patients after ban is lifted by Government

- **Ban in place for more than 20 years to be lifted by the Government**
- **Had been fears that a cut Aids-infected surgeon could infect patient**
- **England's chief medical officer says it's time to scrap 'outdated rules'**

By Jenny Hope

NHS staff infected with the Aids virus will be allowed to carry out operations and other invasive procedures for the first time.

A ban which has been in place for more than 20 years is to be lifted by the Government, which says it will not put patient safety at risk.

Concerns: The ban was imposed because of fears that if an Aids-infected surgeon or dentist cut themselves during certain types of operation, it could result in the patient becoming infected.

Surgeons, dentists, midwives and nurses with HIV will be able to work normally providing they are taking drugs that eradicate the virus in the bloodstream.

In another move, from next year, people will be able to buy HIV self-testing kits that are currently illegal for home use.

England's chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, said science had moved on and it was time to scrap 'outdated rules'.

She said lifting the operating ban on healthcare staff would bring the UK into line with most other Western countries.

An estimated 110 staff working in the NHS would be affected by the change, based on the numbers of Britons with HIV.

From next April, anyone with HIV wanting to carry out surgical and dental procedures would have to go on a confidential register and have three-monthly testing to ensure they were complying with treatment.

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Prof Davies said: 'We've got outdated rules. At the moment we bar totally safe healthcare workers who are on treatment with HIV from performing many surgical treatments, and that includes dentists.' She said modern anti-retroviral drugs enabled people with HIV to lead normal lives, adding: 'With effective treatment, they are not infectious.' The risk to patients was 'absolutely negligible'. About 100,000 people in the UK are living with HIV, although experts say a quarter of those infected do not know it. In 2011, there were 6,000 new diagnoses of HIV in the UK.

Prof Davies said changing the rules would help remove some of the stigma of the disease and encourage healthcare workers who believed they could be at risk to get tested because their careers would no longer be on the line.

Although they are under a professional obligation to get tested in such circumstances, she admitted 'a few' might not do so for fear of the consequences.

Lifting the ban: England's chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, said science had moved on and it was time to scrap 'outdated rules'

Under the new rules, healthcare workers with HIV will be allowed to undertake all procedures if they are on effective combination of anti-retroviral drug therapy.

They must also have an undetectable viral load of HIV in their system, and must be regularly monitored. Public Health England will set up a confidential register holding data on infected workers. There have been four cases worldwide of health workers infecting patients since 1992, with no cases in the UK. None of the workers was on drug treatment at the time.

HIV was no longer a killer disease, Prof Davies said.

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Professor Dame Sally Davies, England's chief medical officer

She added: 'What we need is a simpler system that continues to protect the public through encouraging people to get tested for HIV as early as possible and that does not hold back some of our best healthcare workers because of a risk that is more remote than being struck by lightning.'

Deborah Jack, chief executive of the National Aids Trust, said: 'Allowing healthcare workers living with HIV to undertake exposure-prone procedures corrects the current guidance which offers no more protection for the general public but keeps qualified and skilled people from working in the career they had spent many years training for.'

British Dental Association scientific adviser Professor Damien Walmsley added: 'Dentists in the UK comply with rigorous infection control procedures to protect both patients and the dental team against the risk of transmission of blood-borne infections.'

Sir Nick Partridge, chief executive at HIV charity Terrence Higgins Trust, said: 'Advances in medication have transformed what it means to live with HIV, and it's great to see regulations starting to catch up. 'People diagnosed in good time can have full, healthy lives, and effective treatment dramatically reduces the risk of the virus being passed on.

'So long as the right safeguards are in place, there is now no reason why a dentist or a midwife with HIV should be barred from treating patients, or why people who would prefer to test at home should be denied that chance.'