Enamel, Reimagined: Between Promise, Proof, and the Human Need to Believe

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Prof NH Wood, Managing Editor, SADJ – BChD, DipOdont(MFP), MDent(OMP), FCD(SA), PhD

I was recently confronted with the question from a curious young patient: "why can't teeth heal themselves the way skin does?"

I suspect it is a question every clinician hears at some point, sometimes from a child bewildered by their first cavity, sometimes from an adult facing years of cumulative enamel loss. And if we are honest, it is a question that unsettles even some of us. Why *can't* enamel regenerate? Why does the hardest tissue in the human body have no capacity for repair beyond remineralisation at its surface? While for some the answer is obvious and any discussion on this is without value, however, what if…

These questions have resurfaced with new intensity following the global excitement around experimental keratin-based coatings that showed enamel-like microstructures forming in laboratory conditions. Media outlets rapidly amplified these findings, and within days, patients were asking whether enamel "regrowth" was finally possible.

Something deeper is at work here. It is not simply the allure of scientific novelty; it is the psychology of hope. Regeneration represents more than a biological breakthrough, it speaks to a universal desire to undo damage, reverse time, and restore what disease or life has taken.

But hope and evidence must sit side by side. Today, regenerative enamel research is real, fascinating, and advancing, but it remains preclinical, with no human trials demonstrating functional enamel regeneration. Studies published to date have shown promising enamel-like mineralised layers using keratin peptides, amelogenin-inspired peptides, biomimetic calcium phosphate systems, and peptide-based remineralisation scaffolds in vitro or in animal models. These findings are meaningful, but they are not yet a clinical therapy.

And this is where dentistry must step in with clarity, calmness, and leadership. This editorial is not about dismissing the promise of regenerative enamel. It is about understanding it scientifically, psychologically, and ethically, so that the profession can guide patients with honesty while embracing innovation with integrity.

Why enamel cannot heal

Enamel is the strongest biological material in the human body, yet paradoxically the least capable of self-repair. Its vulnerability lies in its beauty: a crystalline, highly mineralised, acellular structure.

During tooth development, ameloblasts, create the enamel matrix and then undergo programmed cell death or withdrawal once the tooth erupts. This means that no living cells remain within mature enamel. Unlike bone, dentine, or cementum, enamel has no cellular machinery to initiate repair, remodel structure, or deposit new mineral internally. Surface remineralisation does occur, but only under very specific conditions that include adequate salivary flow, fluoride availability, pH balance, and preserved microstructure. Even then, remineralisation is limited to micrometre-scale repair at the outer enamel surface; it cannot regenerate bulk enamel, recreate prism architecture, or restore structural integrity once lost. In short, enamel does not heal, because it has no cells left with which to heal. This biological reality explains why enamel regeneration research is so compelling. It is not merely a scientific curiosity; it aims to overcome a fundamental limitation of human biology.

Where the Science Actually Stands

Over the past two decades, enamel research has moved from the realm of "interesting possibility" toward genuinely sophisticated biomimetic systems. A comprehensive review by Pandya and Diekwisch maps this evolution clearly: from simple remineralising agents to complex protein- and peptide-based scaffolds that attempt to reconstruct enamel-like architectures rather than merely plug mineral loss.[1]

Broadly, current strategies fall into three overlapping categories: (i) biomimetic mineralisation fronts on enamel, (ii) protein- or peptide-based scaffolds that guide crystal growth, and (iii) matrix systems that stabilise and deliver these peptides in clinically realistic conditions. All of them show promise. None of them yet achieve full, functional enamel regeneration in humans.

a) Keratin-Based Scaffolds and Enamel-Like Coatings

The most recent wave of attention has centred on keratin-based systems, driven by the appeal of using a structural protein derived from hair or wool to repair enamel in a sustainable way. In 2025, Gamea and colleagues reported a keratin-film platform that acts as a biomimetic scaffold for enamel regeneration. In a model of early enamel lesions, processed keratin films assembled into a fibrous network which, upon mineralisation, guided the ordered growth of apatite nanocrystals into an enamel-like layer. The treated lesions showed restoration of both optical appearance and mechanical properties compared with sound enamel.[2]

This is an important step: the work demonstrates that keratin can support oriented, enamel-like mineral deposition and substantially improve hardness and aesthetics at the lesion surface. However, it remains an ex vivo / laboratory system, applied to enamel blocks and sections rather than in vivo human teeth. The newly formed layer is still a surface coating, not a complete recreation of native enamel's full thickness and complex prism decussation. Long-term durability under mastication, resistance to wear, and in vivo clinical effectiveness have not yet been established.

b) Biomimetic Mineralisation Fronts

Parallel work has focused on recreating an "enamel-like" mineralisation front directly on damaged enamel. Shao et al. reported a polymer-induced liquid-precursor–type system that produced a biomimetic mineralisation frontier on etched human enamel, ensuring epitaxial growth of hydroxyapatite crystals that were crystallographically aligned with the underlying tissue.[3]

In that *Science Advances* study, the regenerated surface layer exhibited microstructure and mechanical properties approaching natural enamel, with improved hardness and elastic modulus compared with untreated demineralised controls. However, as the authors themselves emphasise, the effect is still located at the outer surface, with limited thickness at the scale of micrometres, and the work was conducted under controlled laboratory conditions. It is best understood as highly sophisticated repair, not yet full biological regeneration of the original tissue architecture.

c) Amelogenin-Derived Peptides and Hybrid Matrices

A major line of research has used the biology of amelogenesis as a template. Amelogenin, the dominant enamel matrix protein during development, has inspired multiple amelogenin-derived peptides designed to bind to demineralised enamel and guide ordered mineral deposition.

- Kwak et al. demonstrated in 2017 that a leucine-rich amelogenin peptide (LRAP) combined with controlled delivery of inorganic pyrophosphate could regenerate an enamel-like mineral layer on etched human enamel. The regenerated layer showed increased mineral density and hardness, and the crystals were oriented in continuity with the underlying enamel.[4]
- Ruan et al. developed an amelogenin–chitosan matrix that promoted the assembly of an enamel-like layer with a dense interface on demineralised enamel surfaces. The newly formed layer contained fluoridated hydroxyapatite, with ordered structure and improved mechanical properties compared with controls.[5]
- Building on these concepts, Mukherjee et al. incorporated amelogenin-derived peptides into a chitosan hydrogel, creating a delivery system that enhanced peptide stability and allowed sustained remineralisation of incipient enamel lesions. In their in vitro model, peptide–chitosan formulations improved surface hardness and mineral density, and the authors described this as a step toward a clinically viable approach for biomimetic enamel regrowth.[6]

Collectively, these studies show that amelogenin-inspired peptides and hybrid matrices can produce enamel-like mineral layers that are chemically and structurally closer to true enamel than traditional fluoride-based remineralisation alone. They can restore hardness, reduce lesion depth, and align new crystals with the underlying tissue.

What they do *not* yet do is:

- regenerate full-thickness enamel,
- recreate the entire hierarchical prism architecture at millimetre scale, or

- demonstrate long-term in vivo performance under real masticatory load.

d) What This Means for "Regeneration"

Taken together, the current evidence supports a careful, honest summary:

- We can substantially enhance remineralisation of early lesions with biomimetic systems.[2,6]
- We can generate enamel-like mineral layers, with improved hardness and crystal orientation, on previously damaged surfaces.[2,6]
- We can develop novel scaffolds, such as keratin films and peptide–hydrogel matrices, that look increasingly clinically plausible.[2,6]

But we cannot yet regenerate natural, fully formed enamel in humans. Pandya and Diekwisch put it starkly: enamel biomimetics has moved from fiction toward reality, but clinical translation remains constrained by issues of thickness, integration, durability, and delivery.[1]

For now, the science justifies bounded optimism: genuine excitement about what these systems can achieve for early lesions and surface repair, coupled with clear recognition that "regrowth" headlines still outpace what is possible at the chairside.

Hope, Hype, and the Psychology of Regeneration

The intense public excitement around enamel "regrowth" did not emerge from nowhere. It reflects something profoundly human: our longing for reversal and for the chance to undo past damage, to recover what illness, time, or circumstance has worn away. In dentistry, this longing has a particularly sharp edge. Teeth form part of identity, self-esteem, and social presence. When enamel is lost, it is not simply tissue gone; it is a loss people *feel*.

This is why regenerative dentistry captures imagination so powerfully. It straddles a psychological boundary between science and hope. And yet, hope has a way of outpacing evidence. In the days following high-profile enamel studies, social media platforms filled with confident declarations that "dentists will be out of business in five years" or that "tooth regrowth is here." None of these statements were true, but they spread rapidly because they were *emotionally compelling*. Research in science communication consistently shows that emotionally charged, future-oriented messages travel farther and stick longer than sober, incremental truths.[7]

Several well-described psychological mechanisms contribute to this pattern:

a) Optimism Bias

Humans naturally overestimate the likelihood of positive outcomes, especially when those outcomes correct something we regret or fear.[8] Regeneration promises precisely that: the undoing of past dental disease.

Optimism bias is not ignorance; it is a predictable cognitive tendency. Patients interpret early scientific work as eventual inevitability. For clinicians, understanding this helps us respond empathetically, not dismissively.

b) Availability Bias

Information that is vivid, recent, and widely discussed is perceived as more likely or more true.[9] A striking enamel-repair micrograph shared online becomes, in the public mind, evidence of imminent clinical translation. Meanwhile, the dozens of unpublicised studies showing partial, surface-limited remineralisation remain invisible. The result? A skewed perception of scientific readiness.

c) The Halo Effect

When research comes from respected universities or appears in high-impact journals, people assume the findings are further along the translational pathway than they truly are.[10] A beautifully engineered enamel-like layer in *Science Advances* feels like a clinical breakthrough, even when authors carefully stress its limitations. This is not a failure of the public. It is a predictable cognitive shortcut.

d) The seductive precision of scientific imagery

Electron micrographs of enamel-like crystals are visually arresting. They look real, tangible, almost touchable. Communication research shows that detailed images create an illusion of mechanism and closeness to application, even when the underlying science remains early-stage.[11] Microscopy magnifies both structure *and* expectation.

e) The clinician's vulnerability to hope

Dentists, too, are susceptible to these biases, not because we misunderstand science, but because we care about our patients. When a parent asks whether their child's early erosion could be reversed, it is tempting to wish we could say yes. Our professional duty, however, requires us to hold space for both hope and truth.

"Hope is not the enemy. Hype is."

These cognitive tendencies do not mean that patients are naïve or that clinicians should become cynics. They simply remind us that regenerative research sits at the perfect intersection of emotion, identity, novelty, and aspiration. It is the ideal recipe for hype. And hype has consequences:

- Patients may pursue unproven "regeneration" products sold online.
- Expectations for treatment outcomes may become unrealistic.
- Clinicians may feel pressured to offer interventions that do not exist.
- Policymakers may misunderstand the timeline of translational research.

Our task, then, is not to extinguish excitement, but to channel it responsibly. To do so, dentistry must cultivate a communication posture grounded in what behavioural scientists call "bounded optimism": a stance that acknowledges potential while clearly defining limits. This approach preserves trust and protects the integrity of the science.

Clinical Responsibilities in the Era of Enamel Headlines

The moment a striking laboratory image circulates online, dentists feel the consequences almost immediately. Patients arrive at appointments with screenshots of enamel micrographs, short clips from social media, or breathless headlines announcing the "end of cavities." Parents ask whether their teenager's early erosion can be reversed; adults who have lived with worn enamel for decades wonder whether they should postpone necessary care and wait for the breakthrough. In these moments, the clinician becomes the interpreter between scientific nuance and public expectation, and how we communicate matters.

The challenge lies in balancing hope with honesty. Patients gravitate toward certainty even when clinicians intend only to express possibility. A simple phrase such as "there are promising early results" may be heard as "a cure is coming soon." Our responsibility, therefore, is to offer what behavioural scientists

call “bounded optimism”: language that acknowledges scientific potential while clearly defining its current limits. It is the difference between saying, “Researchers can regrow enamel,” and saying, “Researchers are beginning to create enamel-like layers in the laboratory, but there is no treatment available yet.” This distinction strengthens trust because it protects patients from unrealistic expectations while respecting their hope.

Another important responsibility is reframing regeneration within the context of prevention. When stories of enamel regrowth trend, many patients infer that prevention is becoming obsolete, that science will soon correct what behaviour or biology has damaged. In reality, every credible enamel-repair strategy is likely to be most effective on early lesions. If regeneration ever becomes clinically feasible, it will not replace prevention; it will amplify the value of early detection, fluoride, saliva preservation, dietary control, and timely intervention. Patients benefit when clinicians explain that emerging science reinforces, rather than replaces, foundational principles of oral health.

Clarity is also essential when distinguishing “repair” from “regrowth.” Most current technologies strengthen weakened enamel or restore the surface through advanced remineralisation; none rebuild full-thickness enamel tissue. Without careful explanation, patients often conflate these concepts. A simple statement such as “We can strengthen enamel surfaces, but we cannot yet regrow enamel that has been lost” helps anchor expectations realistically.

In parallel, clinicians must serve as a barrier against the commercialization of hype. Whenever research captures public imagination, online markets quickly respond with products claiming to regenerate enamel, often without credible evidence. Dentists are uniquely positioned to protect patients from these claims. Guiding patients away from unproven interventions is not gatekeeping, it is professional safeguarding, preserving both patient welfare and the integrity of the science.

Even so, hopeful questions from patients should not be dismissed. They are opportunities to transform curiosity into understanding. When a patient asks whether enamel can grow back, it is often more helpful to invite them into the biology, to explain how enamel forms, why it cannot regenerate naturally, and what researchers are trying to achieve. Such conversations shift the dynamic from expectation to education, strengthening rapport and reinforcing the clinician’s role as a trusted guide.

Ultimately, counselling patients through the haze of hype is a clinical skill in its own right. It requires calm, clarity, and compassion. Patients do not need mechanistic detail; they need reassurance that dentistry already has excellent and reliable tools to protect their teeth today, and that emerging science, though exciting, is not yet a replacement for proven care. Our responsibility is twofold: to honour the evidence faithfully and to protect our patients from the distortions of excitement. Within that balance lies the clinical leadership that stories of enamel regeneration demand.

The future of practice: how regeneration could reshape dentistry

If regenerative enamel technologies eventually progress from laboratory curiosity to clinical application, dentistry will not simply acquire a new material, it will experience a shift in professional identity. Regeneration is not an incremental innovation like a new composite or adhesive; it represents a conceptual transformation in how we think about disease, prevention, and the role of the clinician.

The first change will be pedagogical. Dental curricula, which already strain to balance foundational science with expanding clinical demands, will need to accommodate new competencies: biomaterials literacy, molecular signalling, scaffold science, and the biology of mineralisation. Students of the future may need to understand not only how to remove decay but also how to activate, stabilise, and monitor regenerative treatments. This shift mirrors what occurred when implant dentistry moved from specialist procedure to mainstream competence; regeneration, if realised, will require similar curricular rethinking, faculty development, and refinement of assessment frameworks.

Clinical practice will change as well. Regeneration would not eliminate operative dentistry but would alter its rhythm. Early detection would become even more central, because regenerative interventions would almost certainly work best in the earliest stages of enamel loss. This places renewed emphasis on risk assessment, behavioural counselling, preventive strategies, and minimally invasive philosophies. Dentists may find themselves spending more time analysing the dynamics of risk and lesion activity, and less time replacing what has already been lost. In many ways, regeneration aligns dentistry more closely with medicine: intervene early, preserve tissue, and respect biology.

The economics of dental care would shift in parallel. If regenerative treatments reduce the need for full-coverage restorations, crowns, or large composite rehabilitations, practice models will adjust. This does not spell obsolescence for dentistry, far from it. It simply changes where value lies. Precision diagnostics, personalised risk profiling, long-term monitoring, and prevention-focused care could become more prominent revenue streams. Practices that embrace a biologically oriented, education-rich model of care may thrive, while those relying heavily on restorative throughput may need to adapt.

Ethically, regeneration pushes the profession toward deeper questions: who will have access to these technologies? Will the benefits be equitably distributed, or will they widen existing disparities between those who can afford advanced care and those who rely solely on public systems? Regenerative dentistry could be a catalyst for renewed discussions about justice in oral health, aligning with global calls for universal coverage, integrated care, and upstream prevention. If the field is to avoid repeating past inequities, these conversations must begin long before any regenerative therapy reaches the marketplace.

There will also be implications for the dentist’s role as a communicator and guide. As regenerative science advances, clinicians will face intensified public curiosity. Precision in communication will matter more than ever: distinguishing between repair and regeneration, between evidence and aspiration, between preliminary findings and proven treatment. The dentist of the future will need to be as skilled in managing expectations as in managing disease.

And finally, there is the matter of professional identity. Dentistry

has long been defined by the restoration of what disease and behaviour have damaged. Regeneration suggests a different narrative: one that centres preservation, minimal intervention, and biological partnership. This is not a loss of craft; it is an evolution of it. Dentistry has always been a discipline where science and artistry meet. Regeneration simply shifts the balance more toward biology without diminishing the clinician's judgment, dexterity, or humanity.

The future, then, is not one in which dentists do "less," but one in which they do differently: more prevention, more thinking, more early intervention, more partnership with patients, and more engagement with the biology that underlies oral health. Regeneration, if it arrives, will not reduce the relevance of dentistry; it will reaffirm it provided the profession is ready to lead with clarity, ethics, and scientific groundedness.

Holding hope, holding truth

There is a quiet intimacy to the work we do as dentists. Every day, we restore small pieces of people's lives: a smile, a confidence, a comfort. We work in millimetres, yet the meaning of our craft is measured in something far larger. Perhaps this is why the idea of regeneration touches us so deeply. It speaks not only to science, but to the human desire to mend what has been lost.

As enamel research advances, it is tempting to imagine a future where we can undo decay with biology rather than burs, where the young patient with early erosion can be offered renewal instead of repair. That hope is real, and it is worth holding onto. But as custodians of a scientific profession, we must hold truth just as firmly. The evidence today is promising, but still young. Regeneration has taken its first steps in the laboratory, not yet in the clinic.

Our role, then, is twofold: to nurture the excitement of discovery without surrendering to the seduction of premature certainty, and to guide our patients with clarity grounded in science, not speculation. Dentistry's integrity has always rested on this balance between innovation and responsibility. If regenerative dentistry is to find its place in our future, it must be welcomed through the same gate.

What lies ahead is not a diminishment of our profession, but an evolution of it. Regeneration, should it arrive, will not replace our work but rather will refine its purpose. It will deepen our commitment to early intervention, prevention, and patient partnership. It will invite us to teach differently, think differently, and care differently. And it will require us, perhaps more than ever, to be the calm voice that interprets discovery with precision and humility.

So let us honour the science without overstating it. Let us welcome the future without abandoning the wisdom of the present. And let us remember that the heart of dentistry has never been defined solely by what we can repair, but by how thoughtfully we help others understand what can be preserved.

Hope is powerful. Evidence is stronger. Between them lies the steady, guiding hand of our profession.

Selected Reading

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