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Ethical and Environmental Implications of 3D Printing Waste and Dental Waste on Water and Land Systems.

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R Ahmed,[1] S Ahmed,[2] R Mulder[3]

INTRODUCTION

The integration of three-dimensional (3D) printing technologies into dentistry has expanded clinical capability while simultaneously introducing new environmental waste streams. Alongside conventional dental materials, digital manufacturing processes generate chemical residues, polymer waste, and particulate emissions that contribute to contamination of water and land systems through wastewater discharge, landfill persistence, and material degradation.[1,2,3] Understanding the environmental pathways of both digital and conventional dental waste is therefore essential not only for ecological protection but also for ethical professional practice.[4,5,6]

Dental practice and laboratories generate multiple waste streams that extend beyond clinical settings into broader ecological systems. Inadequate handling and disposal allow various contaminants to enter soil and water environments, posing risks to ecosystems, public health, and future generations.[4,5,6] When environmental harm arises as a predictable consequence of routine professional activity, the issue moves beyond environmental management into the domain of professional ethics.[7,8] The generation and disposal of dental waste must therefore be recognised as ethically significant practices requiring moral scrutiny and accountability.[9,10]

This article examines the composition, clinical handling practices, and environmental pathways of 3D printing and dental waste, with particular emphasis on their impact on water (Sustainable goal 6, 14) and land (sustainable goal 15) systems. It argues that foreseeable environmental harm constitutes an ethical challenge under the HPCSA Booklet 16, titled "Guidelines for the Management of Health Care Waste within contemporary dental practice and proposes an ethics-first sustainability framework to address these concerns.[11]

COMPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PATHWAYS OF 3D PRINTING WASTE IN DENTAL PRACTICE

Material Composition and Waste Generation

Three-dimensional printing in dentistry relies on photopolymer resins, thermoplastics, polymers, and composite materials that generate multiple forms of waste throughout digital workflows.[1,2] Failed or excess prints – including diagnostic models, surgical guides, interim crowns, and dentures –represent a substantial source of discarded material.[2] Support structures used during fabrication are routinely removed and discarded after printing. Uncured or excess photopolymer resin presents environmental risks due to potential toxicity when improperly handled and disposed.[3] Post-processing procedures introduce additional waste through chemical cleaning solvents such as isopropyl alcohol, while standing and finishing processes generate microplastic particles.[2,3] These materials are frequently non-biodegradable and difficult to recycle, contributing to environmental persistence.[8]

Clinical Handling and Disposal Practices

Within clinical and educational environments, 3D printing waste is often managed without proper personal protective measures through variablility and inconsistent practices.[4,12] Materials are typically stored temporarily in sealed containers; however, segregation between hazardous and non-hazardous waste is not always standardised.[12] Disposal may occur through general waste streams or wastewater systems without adequate treatment or differentiation.[2,3] Limited recycling infrastructure and the absence of clear institutional protocols increase the likelihood of improper disposal.[5] As a result, routine workflows may unintentionally facilitate environmentally harmful outcomes despite intentions to maintain clinical efficiency.[2,4]

Pathways to Land Contamination

Land contamination occurs primarily through landfill disposal of polymer-based materials and chemically contaminated waste[5]. Over time, chemical leaching from resins and solvents can infiltrate soil systems, affecting terrestrial ecosystems and groundwater quality.[6] The persistence of non-biodegradable polymers contributes to long-term environmental accumulation and ecological disruption.[2,3]

Pathways to Water Contamination

Water contamination arises when rinse water containing uncured resin, solvents, or particulate residues enter wastewater systems without adequate filtration or treatment.[6,13] These materials may persist within aquatic environments and contribute to chemical pollution, microplastic accumulation, and ecological toxicity.[2,6] Because such contamination pathways are foreseeable outcomes of routine clinical and laboratory processes, continued practices that permit environmental exposure raise ethical concerns regarding preventable harm and professional responsibility.[7,14]

Authors's information
1. Dr R Ahmed. Prosthodontics Department. University of the Western Cape . ORCHID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0286-9047
2. Dr S Ahmed. Prosthodontics Department. University of the Western Cape. ORCHID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8174-6928
3. Prof R Mulder. Prosthodontics Department. University of the Western Cape. ORCHID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8722-7632

Corresponding author
Name: Dr Rukshana Ahmed
Tel: (021) 9373000
Email: rahmed@uwc.ac.za

Conventional Dental Waste and Environmental Impact on Water and Land Systems

While emerging digital technologies introduce new waste streams, conventional dental materials continue to contribute significantly to contamination of water and land systems through similar environmental pathways.[4,6,15] Biomedical and infectious waste require specialised disposal but may still pose environmental risks where infrastructure is limited.[13] Heavy metals such as mercury, silver, and copper from restorative materials can accumulate in soil and aquatic ecosystems, leading to long-term ecological effects.[6] Plastic consumables contribute to landfill persistence and environmental degradation, while chemical disinfectants and pharmaceutical residues may enter wastewater systems, affecting aquatic health.[6] The cumulative and persistent nature of these materials means that conventional dental waste remains a substantial contributor to environmental pollution affecting both terrestrial and aquatic systems.[4,6,15]

Ethical Analysis: Environmental Harm to Water and Land Systems

The contamination of water and land systems through dental and 3D printing waste reframes environmental degradation as a direct ethical concern within contemporary dental practice.[7,8] The principle of non-maleficence requires professionals to avoid causing harm, extending beyond direct patient care to include environmental harms arising from clinical activities.[7] When pollution of soil and water systems is foreseeable, failure to mitigate these risks challenges the ethical obligation to "do no harm".[7,8]

Beneficence requires balancing clinical and technological advantages with broader environmental consequences.[7,14] Sustainability ethics emphasises responsibility to future generations who inherit the ecological impacts of persistent plastic and chemical waste[14]. Environmental justice highlights that environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable communities with limited waste management infrastructure[7]. Ethical responsibility therefore extends beyond individual clinicians to include institutions, educators, manufacturers, and regulators responsible for shaping environmentally responsible professional practice.[9,10]

Ethics-First Sustainability Framework for Environmentally Responsible Dental Practice

An ethics-first sustainability framework positions environmental stewardship as a core professional obligation. [14] Because environmental harms arise from routine professional decisions rather than isolated incidents, ethical reform must occur at systemic levels including governance, institutional policy, and professional education.[7,10] This framework emphasises moral accountability for environmental harm by recognising pollution of water and land systems as ethically significant outcomes of clinical practice.[7,14] Ethical material stewardship requires consideration of environmental impact alongside cost and clinical performance. [2,3] The precautionary principle supports restraint when environmental risks are known but insufficiently mitigated, while lifecycle ethical evaluation considers environmental impact from material production to disposal.[2,3,5] Institutional governance integrates sustainability into accreditation, policy, and audit systems, and ethics education embeds environmental responsibility as a foundational professional competency within dental curricula.[8,9,10]

The recommendations to dental and printing facilities should include collecting uncured/unused liquid resin as hazardous waste, as it is recommended in the United States under RCRA (40 CFR Part 261).[16,17] The development and modification of current products to become more inline with the twelve principles of green chemistry.[18]

CONCLUSION

The environmental consequences of 3D printing waste and conventional dental waste on water and land systems represent ethical challenges rather than purely technical concerns. Understanding the composition, clinical handling practices, and environmental pathways of these materials strengthens professional awareness of the broader harms associated with dental practice. As dentistry continues to embrace technological innovation, ethical reflection must evolve concurrently to ensure that clinical advancement does not occur at the expense of environmental sustainability. The pollution of water and land systems through foreseeable waste pathways demonstrates that environmental degradation is an ethically relevant outcome of professional decision-making. In contemporary dentistry, environmentally responsible practice is not simply desirable, it is an ethical imperative.

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