

Small steam sterilisers:

Evaluating the best steriliser solution for your practice

By Deborah Thame



Steam sterilisation has been proven as the most efficient and cost-effective method of sterilisation in office-based dental practice. Therefore, it's not surprising that you need to regularly evaluate your steam steriliser equipment and ensure it is working safely and effectively. If it isn't - it's time to consider or recommend the purchase of new equipment.

Whether you need to replace your existing steriliser or are making this purchase for the first time, there are some key aspects to consider.

Volume and instrument types

Sterilisers are classified by cycle types and different brands of sterilisers have different cycle types. Each has a corresponding load recommendation, based on instrument type, packaging and weight and it is important to adhere to the manufacturer's guidelines when loading instruments into any steriliser to ensure correct sterilisation. Start with a detailed analysis of the volume and type of instruments you are likely to sterilise on a regular basis at your practice both now and in the near future. With this information, you can assess sterilisers on the basis of whether they will meet your specific workload needs. Failure to take this into account may result in purchasing a steriliser that inhibits rather than enhances efficient work practices or perhaps, more worryingly, simply does not provide a successful sterilisation cycle for your situation - compromising both your team's and the patient's safety.

Physical environment and the re-processing area

Review the environment where the steriliser will be installed. Ensure there is adequate bench space for the operator to work safely with the steriliser. As well as the physical dimensions of the work space, you need to consider the temperature and ventilation of the room. Steriliser performance will be seriously affected by these environmental issues.



Ease of operation

It isn't enough for the steriliser to look good and present a positive safety image to your patients, although the latter is becoming increasingly important, it must also be easy for your operators to use. You should ensure that the control panel is easy to understand, clearly indicates cycle choices and provides unambiguous results about completed cycles. Errors and maintenance data should also be indicated on the control panel.

Performance and cycle types

Review the performance of sterilisers and compare different brands and models.

Sterilisers are often marketed on the basis of the speed of the cycle and this is important when evaluating the steriliser's ability to meet your workload. Remember to check if cycle time stated in the marketing materials includes warming-up and drying times, as these are often omitted. While everyone wants to complete sterilisation in the shortest possible time, it is essential to ensure that your expectations on cycle speed are matched with a corresponding quality of sterilisation.

An understanding of cycle types will provide you with the knowledge to make safe decisions on which cycle type is required for your instrument load. If you are sterilising cannulated devices, you should ensure the steriliser has a cycle specifically designed to sterilise them. To maximise your investment, check that the product you are evaluating has a choice of cycle types available. A choice of cycles enables you to customise your sterilising for best process, time-efficiency and cost management. Ask the supplier to explain the available cycle choices before you commit to a purchase. Don't limit yourself to a single cycle type when a choice of cycles will give you the flexibility to create efficient work practices.

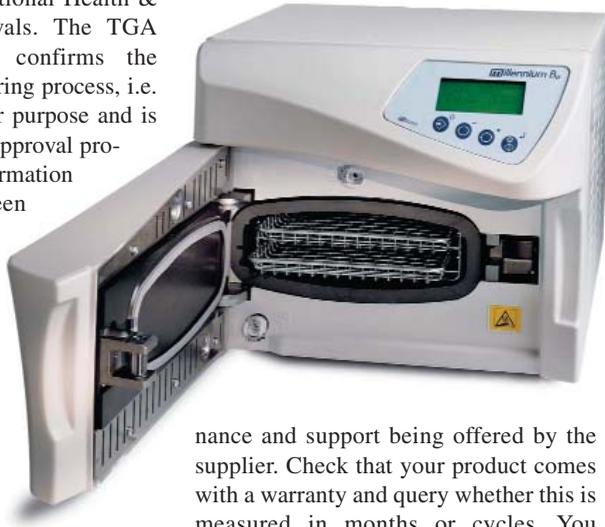
Regulatory compliance

Ensure that all sterilisers on your short-list have been through the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) compliance process and the Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) approvals. The TGA compliance certificate confirms the quality of the manufacturing process, i.e. that the product is fit for purpose and is safe to use. The OH&S approval provides you with the confirmation that the steriliser has been assessed independently as safe to use in the Australian workplace. Do not purchase a product that does not meet these criteria.

Training and maintenance

Ask your supplier about the training and maintenance services that they can offer you, and your operators. Sterilisers and

sterilisation processes have advanced considerably in recent years, and knowledgeable operators are integral to quality infection control. Evaluate the mainte-



nance and support being offered by the supplier. Check that your product comes with a warranty and query whether this is measured in months or cycles. You should ask for costs for service and validation work and parts replacement.

Check the service company's credentials for experience, reliability and value for money. Importantly, ask them what happens if your steriliser breaks down and cannot be fixed on-site. Do they offer loan units? While it is a false economy to purchase a new steriliser and then discover it does not perform as expected, it is even more troubling to select a steriliser that is unreliable and expensive to repair.

I am confident that if you take the time to evaluate your individual requirements you will select a steriliser that will deliver a consistently high level of performance, safety and quality for your dental practice.

Deborah Thame is the co-founder and Managing Director of STS Health, a wholly owned Australian company specialising in the distribution and maintenance of small steam sterilisation equipment. For more info, call (08) 9244-4628 email info@stshealth.com.au or visit www.stshealth.com.au.