



# storage and use of processed instruments

## storage:

Following the decontamination of surgical instruments and other medical devices and accessories, it is important to ensure that the storage conditions maintain the packs in the condition in which they are required for use. As a general rule, this involves maintaining the sterility of wrapped products but may also include those packs that are considered disinfected.

Sterile products are usually stored at the point of use, i.e. wards, clinics, operating theatres etc. However regardless of location, the storage area should be dedicated for the purpose and not used for other activities.

The storage department should be appropriately designed preventing damage to packs and allowing for strict rotation of stocks.

- Shelving should be easily cleaned and allow free movement of air around the stored product.
- Products must be stored above floor level away from direct sunlight and water in a secure, dry, cool and vermin free environment.

Inadequate control of these areas may have an adverse effect on the integrity of the sterile product rendering it unsuitable for use.

Rough handling of sterile products can damage both the product and the wrapping. Do not pack products tightly together on shelves. In draws or in containers as this can damage the packaging (see MDA SN 1999 (32)). Wet products should be returned for reprocessing.

Before being used, the sterile product should be checked to ensure that:

- The packaging is intact
- The sterilization indicator confirms the pack has been subjected to an appropriate sterilization process.
- The product is still within the expiry date.

As a 'rule of thumb' product, which has remained unused for more than six months, should be deemed to be a product of overstocking and an assessment should be undertaken as to its future need.

There are occasions where devices must form part of emergency stocks and as a result may not be used within this time frame. Procedures should be put in place to ensure that these products are subject to a reprocessing regime over time.

## use of processed instruments:

It is the responsibility of the 'user', that is nursing staff etc, to ensure that the equipment they intend using is 'fit for purpose' By this, it is meant that the product has been subjected to an appropriately validated process and that every reasonable precaution has been taken to ensure that the sterile condition (or otherwise) of the product has been maintained up to the point of use.

Responsibility for ensuring that safe and effective decontamination of devices has taken place will fall to a number of healthcare workers depending on the setting in which they work.

- In hospitals, it is often the sterile services technician or nursing auxiliary where decontamination takes place in the clinical setting.
- In a primary care setting it may be the practice nurse or dental technician who undertakes processing.

Each will have his/her own responsibility for the elements of the decontamination process.

In some circumstances, the transportation of devices may be the responsibility of the person who has also decontaminated the product. In others it may be a different person or department for example portering staff or other third party.

Thus, for the product to reach the point of use safely and in good condition, all those involved in the different elements of the decontamination life cycle must be appropriately trained and aware of their responsibility in providing a product, which is fit for use.

Users have a responsibility to notify those providing a decontamination service of any service problems, either about availability of devices or about the devices themselves. This may include surgical instruments, which require repair or sharpening or about late deliveries that may have affected patient treatments.

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