

Joint Statement on Oral Piercing and Tongue Splitting

Introduction

Cosmetic body modification has been increasing in popularity for a number of years, and research has suggested that as many as 10% of adults in England have had some form of body piercing.¹ Tongue or lip piercings are well known forms of oral body modification, while other more extreme procedures include tongue splitting, where the tongue is cut in half to create a distinctive “forked” effect. However, cosmetic body modification is contentious as the risk of adverse consequences is often high, and it has been the subject of significant political and legal debate in recent months.

In February 2018 Wales became the first country in the United Kingdom to ban tongue piercing for anyone under the age of 18. Furthermore, the Court of Appeal recently considered the legality of tongue splitting, and found this to be illegal when performed by a body modification practitioner for cosmetic purposes, even in instances where consent has been obtained (this decision covers England and Wales).²

In this context, the Faculty of Dental Surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons (FDS) and British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS) are concerned that people may be unaware of the risks such procedures carry for their oral health, as well as their wider general health. We have therefore produced this statement to highlight the potential adverse consequences that can arise from oral piercings and tongue

splitting procedures, and the short and long-term health implications.

Oral piercings

Studies have previously estimated that around 1.5% of adults (aged 16 and over) in England have a tongue piercing, and 0.6% have a lip piercing. They are particularly popular amongst young adults – the proportion of 16 to 24 year olds with a tongue or lip piercing rises to 6.5% and 2.7% respectively.³ However, half (50.1%) of tongue piercings performed on young adults are thought to result in complications, and in nearly a quarter (24.3%) of cases further help was sought from a health professional. Similarly, one in five (20.5%) cases of lip piercings led to a complication, with further help being sought in 11.2% of cases.⁴

In Wales it is now illegal to perform a tongue piercing (as well as other forms of “intimate piercing”) on anyone under the age of 18.⁵ There is no national age limit in other parts of the United Kingdom, although some councils have put these in place locally. However, anyone providing cosmetic piercings is required to register with their local authority, and to operate from premises which meet prescribed health and safety standards.⁶

Adverse consequences that can occur from an oral piercing include:

- **Swelling:** Swelling is one of the most common side effects of an oral piercing – a swollen tongue can cause more serious problems if it

leads to airways becoming blocked and creates breathing difficulties.

- **Infection:** The mouth is full of many different types of bacteria, meaning that any invasive procedure such as an oral piercing carries a risk of infection when it is performed – a piercing may also become a source of chronic infection if an adequate level of oral health is not maintained afterwards. In extreme cases an oral infection can potentially become life threatening.
- **Tooth fracture:** Jewellery such as a ring or stud placed through a piercing can grind or catch against the teeth. Over time this causes tooth wear and can even lead teeth to break. It has been estimated that someone with a tongue piercing is twice as likely to suffer a tooth injury as someone without one.⁷
- **Gum damage:** Similarly, if someone frequently plays with the jewellery placed through an oral piercing this can cause localised gingival (gum) recession. Those with tongue piercings are thought to be nearly three times as likely to experience gingival recession as those without one, while someone with a lip piercing is over four times as likely to suffer damage to their gums.⁸
- **Inhalation and ingestion:** Another risk is that the jewellery placed through a piercing may be inhaled or ingested. Inhalation can lead to a ring or stud becoming lodged in the airway, potentially causing breathing difficulties or becoming a chronic source of infection, which will require removal. Ingestion could also cause problems, including gut trauma if the jewellery is sharp and causes a perforation.

- **Oral lesions:** The presence of jewellery in the mouth can also cause lesions to develop in the area around the piercing (this is known as “tissue hyperplasia”). In serious cases surgery may be required in order to remove the lesion and the piercing itself.

Oral piercings can also make it more difficult to speak and eat while someone adjusts to having a piece of jewellery in their mouth.

From an oral health perspective, **we advise against getting any oral piercings**, as there can be adverse consequences which in some circumstances may be serious. **If someone does choose to have a piercing it is crucial that they see their dentist on a regular basis** so that the impact on their oral health can be closely monitored. Furthermore, we stress that **members of the public should never attempt to perform an oral piercing on themselves or anyone else.**

Tongue splitting

Tongue splitting is a more extreme form of body modification. It has been controversial for a number of years as the procedure involves a high degree of bodily harm but provides no medical benefits. The first stage of a tongue split usually involves performing a tongue piercing, after which several approaches can be used to complete the procedure. Often this will involve the use of a scalpel to cut the tongue from the point of the piercing to the tip. Alternatives include using a cauterisation tool to burn the tongue in half, or else a hard thin wire looped between the piercing and the tip of the tongue which will make a cut gradually.

While body modification practitioners are known to offer tongue splitting as a service alongside regulated procedures such as tattooing and piercing, there has been ambiguity over the legal status of tongue

splitting for some time (it is not covered under any existing legislation, so is in effect entirely unregulated). However, a recent decision at the Court of Appeal has provided some degree of clarity. It was judged that tongue splitting, when performed by a body modification practitioner for no medical purpose, constitutes grievous bodily harm even if someone has given consent, and is therefore illegal.⁹

Areas of uncertainty do remain though. The Court of Appeal's jurisdiction covers England and Wales, so the legal status of tongue splitting in the rest of the United Kingdom remains unclear. Dr Samantha Pegg, a legal expert at Nottingham Law School, has also highlighted that there is ambiguity around the legality of some alternative approaches to tongue splitting, such as using multiple (legal) tongue piercings to achieve the same effect. There have been calls for the law around tongue splitting to be clarified, and concerns have also been raised that despite the legal debate the demand for tongue splitting procedures will continue but simply be driven underground.¹⁰

The FDS and BAPRAS therefore believe that it is important to highlight the health risks associated with tongue splitting so that those still considering the procedure are fully aware of these.¹¹ Such risks include:

- **Haemorrhage:** The tongue is the site of several major veins and arteries. Splitting the tongue can therefore cause considerable bleeding and carries a risk of significant blood loss.
- **Nerve damage:** The tongue is important for speech, swallowing, taste and touch within the mouth. It has a large number of nerves within it which, if damaged during a tongue split, can greatly impact upon the function of the tongue. In

addition, nerve damage can result in pain, altered sensation or numbness which in some cases can be permanent.

- **Adverse reaction to anaesthetic:** In instances where local anaesthetic is used as part of a tongue split,¹² there is a risk that the person undergoing the procedure may suffer an adverse reaction. The use of local anaesthetic always carries a small risk of serious consequences such as local anaesthetic toxicity leading potentially to seizures, coma, respiratory and cardiac arrest. It is therefore important that there is appropriate monitoring carried out by a health professional trained in recognising and managing such adverse reactions and that the necessary resuscitation equipment and medication are to hand.

In addition, as is the case with oral piercings, a tongue splitting procedure carries the risk of swelling, infection and of causing medium to long-term difficulties with speaking and eating. Maintaining good oral health and hygiene may also become more challenging after a tongue split.

Furthermore, in cosmetic surgery a surgeon may require their patients to undergo psychological evaluation as part of pre-operative assessment, to identify conditions such as body dysmorphic disorder (a mental health condition where someone spends a lot of time worrying about flaws in their appearance which are usually unnoticeable to others).¹³ However, as tongue splitting is not a regulated procedure, there are no guarantees that any similar assessments will be undertaken beforehand.

We strongly advise people against undergoing a tongue splitting procedure, and to be aware that in England and Wales body modification

practitioners who offer this service are likely to be acting illegally as the law currently stands. In addition, as with oral piercings, we stress that **members of the public should never attempt to perform a tongue split on themselves or anyone else.**

Recommendations

The debate around body modification is becoming increasingly prominent, and the FDS and BAPRAS are keen that people understand the health risks associated with procedures such as oral piercing and tongue splitting. We advise that:

- Oral piercings should be avoided as these can have a significant impact on oral health, and in some cases lead to serious adverse consequences.
- If someone does have an oral piercing, they should visit their dentist on a regular basis so their oral health can be monitored.
- Tongue splits should also be avoided as these procedures carry significant health risks, and people should be aware that body modification practitioners offering such services are now likely to be doing so illegally.
- Members of the public should never attempt to perform an oral piercing or a tongue split on themselves or anyone else.

References

¹ Angie Bone, Fortune Ncube, Tom Nichols, Norman D. Noah, "Body piercing in England: a survey of piercing at sites other than the earlobe", *British Medical Journal*, 2008, 336, p. 1426-28

² *R v BM* (2018) EWCA Crim 560 (accessed on 27 June 2018 via:

<http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Crim/2018/560.html>)

³ Angie Bone, Fortune Ncube, Tom Nichols, Norman D. Noah, "Body piercing in England: a survey of piercing at sites other than the earlobe", *British Medical Journal*, 2008, 336, p. 1426-28 (Table 3)

⁴ Angie Bone, Fortune Ncube, Tom Nichols, Norman D. Noah, "Body piercing in England: a survey of piercing at sites other than the earlobe", *British Medical Journal*, 2008, 336, p. 1426-28 (Table 5)

⁵ Under the terms of the *Public Health (Wales) Act 2017*

⁶ Under the terms of the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982* and *Local Government Act 2003*

⁷ NL Hennequin-Hoenderdos, DE Slot, GA Van der Weijden, "The incidence of complications associated with lip and / or tongue piercings: a systematic review", *International Journal of Dental Hygiene*, 14 (1), 2016, p. 62-73

⁸ NL Hennequin-Hoenderdos, DE Slot, GA Van der Weijden, "The incidence of complications associated with lip and / or tongue piercings: a systematic review", *International Journal of Dental Hygiene*, 14 (1), 2016, p. 62-73

⁹ *R v BM* (2018) EWCA Crim 560 (accessed on 27 June 2018 via: <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Crim/2018/560.html>)

¹⁰ Kingsley Napley, *Criminal Law Blog: Tongue splitting, ear removal and branding - the limits of consent as a defence to extreme body modification*, 5 April 2018 (accessed on 29 June 2018 via: <https://www.kingsleynapley.co.uk/insights/blogs/criminal-law-blog/tongue-splitting-ear-removal-and-branding-the-limits-of-consent-as-a-defence-to-extreme-body-modification>)

¹¹ For further information: F. Aga and R. Harris, "Letter: Cosmetic tongue split", *British Dental Journal*, 214 (6) 23 March 2013, p. 275

¹² There have been reports of local anaesthetic being used by some body modification practitioners in tongue splitting procedures: BBC News, *Illegal tongue splitting procedures exposed*, 9 October 2017 (accessed on 3 July 2018 via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-41519892>)

¹³ NHS Choices, [Body dysmorphic disorder](#) (accessed on 2 July 2018 via: www.nhs.uk/conditions/body-dysmorphia)