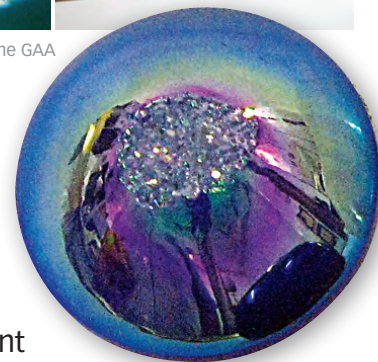




Images courtesy of the GAA

TREATMENT IS NOT A DIRTY WORD



With an array of gemstone treatments in use, retailers need to realise that treatment disclosure is more important than ever. The GAA's **KATHERINE KOVACS** reports.

When trying to sell a ring, does one tell the customer that the stone is a synthetic? Does one explain what synthetic means? Presuming the ring is set with a blue topaz, does one tell the customer that the stone has been irradiated? If it is emerald, does one mention that the emeralds have been oiled? And what if it contains heated sapphires or rubies?

In these increasingly litigious times, many retailers will have to re-think the way they sell gems. This does not have to be a bad thing; a short explanation about gemstone treatments will go some way to demonstrating knowledge and establishing trust.

The golden rule is to be as clear as possible about the product, steering away from ambiguous terms and avoiding assumptions about the customer's level of gemmological knowledge. An example is given in a 2005 press release from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC): "Consumers should not be misled by jewellers using 'in house' jargon when presenting items for sale... for

example, jewellers understand that a 'Biron emerald' is a laboratory emerald, whereas a consumer may assume it is a natural emerald from a place called Biron."

While many jewellers will disclose if a gem is synthetic, there are many more that don't disclose treatments. It may be the case that a treatment is so widely performed and accepted – such as the heat treatment of sapphires – that there doesn't seem to be any need to disclose it. The ACCC, however, doesn't take this viewpoint, stating that "consumers have a reasonable expectation that any treatment of gemstones to enhance their aesthetic appearance and value be disclosed," particularly, "where the gemstone's value is significantly less than the value of an equivalent untreated gemstone".

Treatment is not a dirty word; it is a fact of life that many stones are treated to enhance their beauty and that many of these treatments are stable and have been carried out for many years. The vast majority of emeralds, rubies and sapphires on the

market today have been treated in some way. In the case of rubies and sapphires, heat treatment is so pervasive – and hard to detect – that many gem labs will state that a gemstone "bears no evidence of treatment" rather than saying that the stone hasn't been treated.

The ACCC guidelines state that gem sellers must be clear about what treatments have been carried out, whether they include irradiation, heat, oiling, diffusion, glass filling, coating or any of the many other treatments on the market today. New treatments and new variations on old treatments means that even qualified gemmologists are challenged to keep their knowledge up to date.

If in any doubt as to the true nature of a gemstone, there are a number of steps that retailers can take to ensure proper disclosure. The first is to increase product knowledge by investing in gemmological education for managers and floor staff, remembering that any staff with education may need a refresher course – it can be surprising to realise how many developments

have occurred since the course was last taken. A wide range of courses with different levels of learning outcomes are available from the GAA and it may also be worth investing in certification from a gem lab for specific stones.

The world jewellery confederation CIBJO has been working with leading international industry bodies to come up with a conclusive disclosure system (see the April 2010 issue of *Jeweller*).

Failure to comply with ACCC guidelines regarding disclosure can result in fines of up to \$220,000 for individuals or \$1.1 million for companies, plus costs for corrective advertising. Probation or community service orders can also be imposed. Visit the ACCC website for guidelines as well as checklists for advertising.

Many members of the public view the jewellery industry with some degree of distrust. It may be because what they're buying mystifies them. Being upfront about gemstone treatments not only de-mystifies the purchase but gives clients greater trust in the industry as a whole ♦