



Handling Complaints



Susan N'Jie discusses the obligation of all GDC registrants to comply with the latest guideline - Principles of complaint handling

From July 2006 the General Dental Council registration list expanded to include dental hygienists, therapists, nurses, technicians, clinical technicians and orthodontic therapists. All registrants to the GDC list will be under obligation to comply with the new guidelines as outlined in *Principles of complaint handling*, one of the final two booklets in the *Standards for dental professionals* series issued to all GDC registrants. This latest booklet supersedes the previous GDC *Maintaining Standards* guidance leaflets, *Guidance to dentists on professional and personal conduct* and the separate *Guidance to dental hygienists and dental therapists on professional and personal conduct*.

Within *Maintaining Standards*, the advice on complaint handling was limited to a short paragraph in each booklet telling the practitioner to resolve any matters at practice level, with an endorsement for the 'detailed guidance on handling complaints issued by the NHS Executive and the British Dental Association'. It gave the practitioner a reference to the local resolution procedure in *'Complaints, listening.... acting.... improving Guidance pack for general practitioners'* (health department 1996).

The new GDC advice does not differ from the NHS local resolution, and the practice based procedure booklets distributed by the health department to primary care practitioners in 1996 continue to apply until the amended complaints regulations and guidance are issued sometime this year.

Your Practice

Your practice procedure must be easy to use, written in clear, uncomplicated language and available for patients to see. The new guidance highlights the point that complaints should be dealt with as quickly as possible, ideally with an acknowledgment sent out within three working days and a response to the complaint given no later than ten working days after receiving it.

If time is needed to investigate a complaint, this must be mentioned in the acknowledgment and the patient should be kept informed of progress throughout.

Guidance is also given on the manner in which you should deal with a complaint, stressing the importance of not being defensive and the need to offer an apology. At the end of your investigation into the complaint you must send your patient a letter explaining your findings and any practical solutions you are prepared to provide. This may include suggesting outing things right at no further costs. If despite all best efforts the patient is not satisfied, you must inform NHS patients about the NHS complaints system – more details are available from the patient advice and liaison service (www.pals.nhs.uk).

According to NHS guidelines, patients should normally complain within six months of the event(s) concerned or within six months of becoming aware that they have something to complain about.

Primary care practitioners and NHS managers can use their discretion to waive this time limit if there are good reasons why the patient could not complain earlier. Within the new GDC guidelines no time limits are given. Therefore, to comply with GDC guidelines all complaints – whether private or NHS- must be considered, irrespective of whether or not six months have elapsed. To fail to consider such an 'out of time' NHS complaint would amount to professional misconduct.

If patients are taking legal action or have stated their intention to start legal action then they may not also use the NHS complaints procedure, unless part of their complaint is about something unconnected with the legal action. If they stop the legal action (or there are outstanding issues that have not been resolved by it), then they can still use the NHS complaints procedure to pursue their concerns.

Private patients should be advised of the Dental Complaints Service, the new GDC complaints resolution service specifically for private treatment (www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk). This has changed the way in which complaints about private dentistry are handled, offering an independent alternative for private patients if, even after best efforts to address the issues in-house, a complaint remains unresolved.

See the positive

When handling complaints from patients you must apply the principles as outlined in *Standards for dental professionals*, which state: 'Put patients' interests first and act to protect them.' The guidance states that patients who complain should be given a helpful response at the appropriate time. Their right to complain must be respected. Indeed, the right to complain should be welcomed by the profession with a need to view the complaints received in a positive light. They should be analysed and acted upon to improve service in the future. All patients who feel they have had a bad experience, but do not or cannot complain, will go elsewhere and tell other people of their dissatisfaction.

On the bright side, if a patient's complaint is welcomed, the issue is dealt with satisfactorily and an apology given, then not only has the patient-professional

relationship been maintained, it has also been improved upon. Patients will speak of how well they were dealt with and not focus on the original complaint. A well-run complaints procedure can be a practice's best marketing tool.

It is important to note that complaints will not always be about the technical skills provided or the quality of care given. Patients increasingly complain because the level of service does not meet with their expectations. A practitioner may well have provided the highest standard of dentistry but the service level has not been met, often due to a lack of communication. Dentistry has become more of a consumer purchase and service levels are all-important.

According to the GDC, the *Standards for dental professionals* series is designed 'to help us, as dental professional, to get things right first time – so improving patient satisfaction, and making our professional lives more rewarding'. By changing attitudes to complaints this can be achieved.

Initially Published in *The Dentist* October 2006.