

# IT'S MAKE YOUR MIND UP TIME

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The BDJ Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews.

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The news that dentists face the prospect of a 64% rise in their annual retention fee won't have escaped you. The word 'shock' doesn't do this development justice. In fact I was so shocked that I raised the matter with the senior team at the General Dental Council (GDC) the day after the announcement. I hoped that I would be offered reasoned explanations and a rational justification for the decision. I wasn't. And so, I am unable to reassure you.

Instead, I am more convinced than ever that we are faced with an arrogant and self-righteous regulator. Having long-defended the last vestiges of professionally informed regulation, I am now not sure that I can continue to do so. All the signals are that our current regulator is detached from the profession, ignorant of the reality of what dentistry is and incapable of managing its affairs in an effective way.

Firstly, Mr Moyes' words at the Malcolm Pendlebury lecture of the Faculty of General Dental Practice (UK) ([www.gdc-uk.org/newsandpublications/viewfromthechair](http://www.gdc-uk.org/newsandpublications/viewfromthechair)). In it he laid out a highly ambitious agenda for broadening the activity and interests of the GDC. Secondly, there is the rise itself and the GDC's justifications for it ([www.gdc-uk.org](http://www.gdc-uk.org)). And thirdly, the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) has published its report into the performance of all the healthcare regulators, the GDC included ([www.professionalstandards.org.uk](http://www.professionalstandards.org.uk)).

The PSA report makes alarming reading. It lists a litany of failure, inefficiency and mismanagement. It describes limited ability to improve performance in relation to prior criticisms and a depressing decline of performance in many areas. The failings are of a type that if found in a dental practice would open

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the dentist to serious questions about fitness to practise. The CQC would issue compliance notices. The future of the practice would be, quite properly, at real risk. This report would be bad enough if it was the first of its kind, but it is not. Hence, the GDC's acknowledgement that its performance is 'not acceptable' really doesn't wash. Repeated acceptance of inadequacy does not solve the problem.

In our meeting, it was established that the GDC has done no work at all in determining the background factors that may have contributed to the rise in complaints, instead seeking to require the dentists, alone, to fix things. This totally disregards significant changes in our sphere such as the presence of clearly flawed systems and aggressive litigators. Some time spent by the GDC understanding the world of dentistry may have informed its management systems better. This would have been preferable to just watching the problem grow and throwing ever more resource at it. The GDC confirms that all the regulators have seen similar rises in complaints, but acknowledges that none of the others is contemplating such a fee rise. Indeed some of them have reduced fees.

It appears, therefore, that we are being regulated by a GDC that is incapable of doing its job properly. And its answer to its own difficulties is to call upon dentist registrants to provide yet more funding through a meteoric rise in fees. This is completely at odds with the 2011 Government White Paper *Enabling Excellence*.<sup>1</sup>

But the truly galling thing in all of this is that the GDC has failed to see that the real priority should be addressing its fundamental inability to deal effectively with its primary function. Instead, the leadership of

the GDC prefers to seek to extend its remit. More importantly, the lack of insight into what dentistry is and is not undermines any confidence that *OUR* money will be used wisely or efficiently. Dentistry is a clinical intervention, and recipients of that intervention expect that those who provide it be subject to oversight and scrutiny. That function is paramount and it is not being fulfilled properly. Until it is, the GDC should cease its empire-building and put its house in order.

Professional regulation is about the protection of patients. Effective regulation requires proper engagement between a credible regulator and the profession so regulated. But our recent experience of engagement has been in the form of a deluge of consultations from the GDC that have been written in a way that fails to permit anything like meaningful responses. The outputs of those perfunctory consultations have therefore been self-serving.

Well, it's time the GDC actually got some genuine feedback. We are asking all BDA members to tell us what they actually think about the reality rather than the facade. We are urging members to answer our online survey ([www.bda.org](http://www.bda.org)). We will use the findings to provide genuine opinion. We have also written to the Minister to ask his view of the developments in the context of *Enabling Excellence*.

So by the end of this 'consultation' the GDC should have gained some real insight. Please answer our questionnaire and please encourage your friends and colleagues to do so.

1. Department of Health. *Enabling Excellence*. [White paper]. 2011. Online paper available at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/216580/dh\\_124374.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216580/dh_124374.pdf) (accessed July 2014).

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