DO I QUALIFY?

What will happen to dental nurses who do not hold a registrable qualification or qualify for registration under the transitional arrangements when the GDC's PCD register opens? **David Turner** reports.

‘Dentists will be under an obligation to ensure they work only with nurses practising legally.’

Progress towards dental nurse registration recently stepped up a gear with the publication by the General Dental Council (GDC) of the draft legal changes necessary to introduce registration. The changes are now due to take effect in January 2005, and the GDC expects to begin registration soon after (in ‘early 2005’).

The simplest route to registration will be for nurses who hold registrable qualifications or other qualifications valid for registration under the two-year transitional arrangements (see far right for details).

Dental nurses who are trained and experienced but not qualified will be covered by so-called ‘grandparenting’ arrangements,

which will operate during the two-year transitional period. They must demonstrate proven experience of working satisfactorily as a dental nurse for a period of at least four years full-time (or the equivalent period part-time, that is 1,000 days) in the previous eight years. In calculating time worked, maternity leave, sickness absence, holiday leave and time spent undertaking Continuing Professional Development can be included (provided the dental nurse remained employed in that time).

Qualifications for registration

Dental nurses who meet these criteria can have their declaration of experience signed off by someone who is already registered with the GDC. This does not necessarily need to be a dentist but could be, for example, a senior dental nurse in the practice who has already registered. Any registrant who signs in support of an applicant should be sure that the information provided by the applicant is true, as far as they are aware. If the GDC rejects an application for registration, the dental nurse will be able to appeal.

The GDC has also recently approved the development of a new route to registration for dental nurses who have some experience but not enough to meet the grandparenting requirements - to be known as 'Access to Registration Training'. See our story on page 6.

A dental nurse who is studying for a registrable qualification will be allowed to practise under supervision. Dental nurses will be permitted to be in training for as long as the relevant awarding body permits candidates to be registered.

An unqualified dental nurse who, for whatever reason, is not covered by any of the transitional arrangements and is not prepared to seek a registrable qualification will no longer be allowed to work as a dental nurse, once the transitional period has ended (two years after the introduction of registration), since this would constitute illegal practice on their part. Dentists will be under an obligation to ensure that they work only with dental nurses who are practising legally.

It will, therefore, be necessary for such a dental nurse to be made redundant, and statutory redundancy payments will have to be made where appropriate. This could not be regarded as unfair dismissal, since the law on dental nurse registration would render any contract of employment null and void. Alternatively, a dental nurse in this situation could be re-employed within a practice doing a job that does not require a qualification (for instance, that of dental receptionist).

The BDA is working hard to ensure that the terms of dental nurse registration are such that no practice is put in the position of having to make staff redundant. Nevertheless, dentists would be well advised to ensure that dental nurses are advised at the earliest stage of the planned registration requirements and that unqualified dental nurses are encouraged and helped to begin working towards a registrable qualification.

The following will be registrable qualifications for dental nurses:

- ♦ National Certificate awarded by the National Examining Board for Dental Nurses;
- ♦ National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) / Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) Oral Healthcare Dental Nursing Level 3;
- ♦ Certificate of Proficiency in Dental Nursing awarded by a dental hospital that is recognised by the Association of Dental Hospitals.

Dental nurses with the following qualifications will be able to apply for registration during a two-year transitional period after registration begins:

- ♦ National Certificate awarded by the National Examining Board for Dental Surgery Assistants;
- ♦ Certificate of Proficiency in Dental Surgery Assisting awarded by a dental hospital which is recognised by the Association of Dental Hospitals;
- ♦ BTEC National Certificate in Science (Dental Surgery Assisting or Dental Nursing);
- ♦ Full SCOTVEC Certificate in Dental Surgery Assisting or Dental Nursing;
- ♦ Royal Navy - Part III DSA Training (Certified);
- ♦ Army - Class 2 Dental Clerk Assistant Trade Training;
- ♦ Royal Air Force - DSA Training and Trade Ability Test B;
- ♦ Dental Defence Agency - Basic Dental Nurse Training and Individual Development Portfolio Stage 1 (IDPS1).

Dental nurses whose names are on the current National Voluntary Register of Dental Nurses (maintained by the Dental Nurses Standards and Training Advisory Board), who must hold the National Certificate or a qualification considered equivalent by the Board, will be eligible for direct entry onto the mandatory register when it first opens.