Lifelong Learning

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The General Dental Council's Recertification Scheme — Lifelong Learning — was launched at Dentistry 2000. Subsequently, all registered dentists have been sent the introductory booklet explaining the purposes and features of a scheme specifically designed for dentistry.

This initiative has been several years in the planning with wide consultation at all stages of its development. With the introduction of anticipated legislation, mandatory participation in the scheme will be phased in over a period of three years commencing 1 January 2002, with dentists who have been on the Register longest being the last to be assimilated into the scheme. In the interim, all dentists are encouraged to join the Preparatory Scheme commencing on 1 October 2000. During the Preparatory Scheme, the Council will work with dentists to realise which aspects of their professional development would benefit most from continuing professional development activities.

Through lifelong learning based on recertification, self-regulation will be strengthened and the profession will have a platform on which to develop robust arrangements for clinical governance. The demonstrable credibility which this development will bring will enhance the protection of the public and its confidence in the profession.

Providers of continuing education have unprecedented opportunities — fuelled by the flexibility afforded by the Recertification Scheme — to be innovative in establishing new methods of teaching and learning and to widen access to new knowledge and understanding. Through innovation in educational provision and the discerning consumer-instinct of dentists, the scope for future improvement in the quality of activities in the field of continuing dental education should be assured. I will be encouraging the Council, however, to consider developing means of ensuring the sufficiency of activities forming part of Verifiable Continual Professional Development (CPD).

Regarding self-directed General CPD, the goal is to encourage individual dentists to broaden their knowledge and skills in ways that will bring greatest benefit to their patients. Activities may be directed at improving clinical or non-clinical aspects of the provision of oral health care including, for example, IT development and practice management. To help target General Continuing Professional Development to the best possible advantage, a structured personal development plan may be of assistance, rather than an unconsidered or random programme of activities. Whatever the activities, it would be most regrettable if they were viewed and undertaken solely as an expectation imposed by the Council. Learning can refresh approaches to the challenges of contemporary dentistry and also provide tangible cost benefits.

The launch of Lifelong Learning is only the beginning of the work of the Council on recertification. The Council's new Recertification Directorate, the Recertification Steering Group with its profession-wide representation and the various members of the Council who are shouldering special responsibility for developing the Recertification Scheme, deserve the support of the profession as they focus their attention on the important task of maximising the benefits of the Preparatory Scheme.

Lifelong Learning is a much-needed development in professional self-regulation. With exponential growth in the knowledge-base necessary for everyday clinical practice, an ongoing commitment to learning must be viewed as a professional responsibility for all those wishing to retain their name on the Register. We should not only accept that yesterday's knowledge cannot be assumed to meet contemporary care expectations, we should also welcome recertification as an exciting opportunity to enrich our working lives through increased professional satisfaction.

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