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Learning about learning

Continuing Professional Development (CPD), as part of the GDC's Lifelong Learning scheme has been mandatory for all registered UK dentists for over one year now.

As with seat belts, mobile phones and email there is unlikely to be any going back – and anyway why would we want to? Well, because some argue that the system as established is so full of loopholes and available dodges that it is not worth the paper on which the CPD hours are accumulated. Others disagree.

Those who question the value of CPD as it is currently organised point to its relatively unsupervised nature. Not only is it entirely possible, point out the critics, to 'make up' the non-verified 35 hours a year but there are also deceitful ways around obtaining the 15 verifiable hours as well.

For example, it is not necessary to reach a particular score in multiple choice answer schemes before being awarded the CPD hours. 'What use is that?' cry the detractors, 'you can just go through and tick answers at random.' That is true but it is equally well observed that it is possible to go to a lecture, sleep through it and still get a CPD certificate, so that doesn't prove anything either.

The GDC maintains that it is not necessarily gaining a specified score which is important but the learning experience itself. It may be that a respondent gets less than half the answers correct but he or she still had to participate and in the process, hopefully, learnt something. Besides, if you get all the answers right does that mean that you know enough about the subject already and should be moving to an area about which you are less familiar?

Let us suppose that we were to go down the road of only awarding hours to those with a score deemed high enough. The next question to ask is whether or not the participant has actually learnt anything useful as a result. How do we test that? And even assuming that we can make such an assessment, how do we go the next step and measure whether or not the dentist has put that learning into action? Has it had any effect on daily practice, on improving patient care?

The nub of the detractors' argument is that we have to have proof, or evidence, of having attended or paid

attention, that is to say proving it to the satisfaction of someone else. Although surely, as professional people we should have integrity enough not to cheat at such things. Further, rather than perceiving CPD as an imposition by the seemingly ever present 'they' we should by now be starting to use it positively for the good of our own development, our practices and our patients.

Methods of planning such as 'training needs analysis' can help guide the way to using CPD to its best effect. In essence it is about identifying goals, deciding on ways to achieve them and seeking the appropriate training to enable one to reach them. Viewing CPD in this way makes complete sense, as well as providing a great deal of self worth and being tax deductible! At present, what often happens is that we participate in activities, be they courses, lectures or reading on subjects we like or about which we are already knowledgeable. This is perhaps a criticism of greater worth than the more frequently rehearsed one about the loopholes.

However, none of this should detract from the value we as a profession are now gaining from our investment in this important activity, nor from the foresight of those who argued for its initiation. We are still at the very earliest stages of its development and as such are a long way ahead of many other countries around the world and even, perhaps surprisingly, amongst our European neighbours.

To help put it into a perspective it is worth remembering the Dentists Act of 1921 which introduced mandatory registration. Those dentists already practising in that year did not have to possess a qualification, needing by virtue of a grandfathering clause only to prove that they were already working in patients' mouths. It was only in the 1990s that the last of those '1921 dentists' finally retired, some 70 years on. Come the year 2075 then, all might be very different in the world of CPD, although I doubt it will take that long before the system is improved, refined and developed to the benefit of us all.

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