

“...appointments [to the General Dental Council] can deliver a Goldilocks outcome...”

A profession to the core

What is a profession? Try ‘a vocation or calling, especially one that involves some branch of advanced learning or science’.

A professional says what (s)he does, and does what (s)he says. It’s a trust thing. As Sir Wilfred Fish, at the first ever meeting of the GDC on 26 Sep 1956, declared, a professional ‘*is expected to serve the interests of the client consistently and without regard to their own interests...as a matter of conscience.*’

The GDC itself was founded just 50 years ago. Creating the GDC did not create a profession; it recognised it.

And why was the GDC created? Not to make dentists more or less professional, but to ‘*protect the public from charlatans who wanted to cash in on dentists’ reputation for professionalism*’ by pretending to be dentists. The GDC, in other words, stands sentry at the barriers to entering the profession. Tom, Dick or Harriet can’t set up as a dentist until they register with the GDC.

I am a dentist myself: I studied at Glasgow and Cardiff, and practise in Edinburgh. The GDC doesn’t protect my patients from me. It protects my patients from charlatans pretending to be me, or at least, to have my skills and care.

Botched tooth-whitening is only the latest horror perpetrated by these pretenders. Because of the GDC, my patients may fear the drill, but they needn’t fear that I am not as skilled and competent as I say. It’s about trust, assurance, and safety.

Stephen Hancocks recently, and entertainingly, argued that denying dentists the opportunity to vote fellow professionals onto the GDC meant the end of the profession. Mr Hancocks praised the GDC, and I thank him. But to tell dentists that they are not professionals because of the way their regulatory body is organised is faintly demeaning.

We should not confuse a regulatory body with a trade union. The BDA is legally constituted as a trade union, representing its membership. The GDC is not.

The GDC is not a senate of dentists. Set up by Act of Parliament, it has no remit to represent the dental profession. You fund it to protect patients by protecting your title, so other people can’t pretend to be dentists. Registration is a privilege, not a right (as representation is), earned by proving your worth as a dentist.

Elections ensure that decision makers and their electors share a common interest – an excellent reason for *not* electing a regulating body. Regulators should owe no one any favours. They should be, as Dame Janet Smith recommended following

the Shipman Enquiry, ‘servants of the public interest’ rather than ‘representatives of the profession’.

When well-intentioned dentists have stood for the GDC to ‘represent dentists’ interests’ they have missed the point. Members of the GDC are not there to represent those who elected them. They regulate dentists to protect patients.

Of course, professionals on the regulatory body bring crucial insights into regulating their peers. They must stay. But why insist the President is a dentist? He or she should be the best person for the job.

A GDC consultation echoed the Government’s White Paper, *Trust, Assurance and Safety: The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century*, concluding that regulation that is independent of government *and* practitioners is the way forward.

It was claimed on this page recently that this makes the annual retention fee into a ‘licence to practice’. Spot on! It always was. You pay your money to keep out the shams who lay claim to your name. Whatever reform brings, we will continue prudently to contain and, where possible, cut costs, keeping the fee to a minimum.

But why should appointing members of the GDC serve patients better? It’s a fair question. By appointing, we can ensure that the range of members from the profession reflects the diversity of GDC registrants. Elections may not deliver that. Appointments can deliver a Goldilocks outcome – just right.

None of this disenfranchises newly-registered DCPs, because none of it disenfranchises dentists. Meanwhile, dental professionals are more involved in the GDC’s work than ever before, making a real difference on committees, boards, working groups, panels and elsewhere, inspecting dental schools and determining colleagues’ fitness to practise. Crucially, they are closely involved in setting the standards colleagues must meet to register, and stay registered.

We must keep pace with the changing nature and context of dental practice and healthcare regulation, and meet the expectations of a better informed and more articulate public. We must deliver.

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