

*'Through the Service, patients across the UK can complain about any aspect of private dental care...'*

# The Dental Complaints Service – how it works

*Since its launch in May 2006, the Dental Complaints Service has successfully provided a much-needed and previously unavailable outlet for resolving complaints involving private dental treatment. Here, Hugh Smith gives an overview of the Service and how it operates.*

Patients receiving private dental care have, for the past year, at last had somewhere to turn if they want advice about a complaint or if you, on behalf of your dental practice, have been unable to resolve a complaint. For many years, NHS patients have been able to use the NHS complaints scheme to help them resolve outstanding complaints. Private patients have had no such option.

Until now, that is, with the advent of the Dental Complaints Service. Briefly, the aim of the Service is to help patients and dental professionals resolve complaints about private dental treatment or service. Although launched and funded by the General Dental Council, the Service, with its own staff and office, operates independently of the UK dental regulator and its fitness to practise procedures, which continue to consider issues of patient safety.

Through the Service, patients across the UK can complain about any aspect of private dental care, involving any member of the dental team, including those members who have newly registered with the GDC: dental technicians, clinical dental technicians, dental

nurses and orthodontic therapists. We try to help resolve complaints as fairly, efficiently, transparently and swiftly as possible, and are delighted that several dental professionals have sought our help to resolve long-standing or problematic complaints. One in six patients has contacted us at the suggestion of a dental professional.

## MAKING CONTACT

The Dental Complaints Service was launched in May last year, and since then we have received more than 5,000 calls to our local rate complaints hotline (08456 120 540). Complaints need not be made in writing, but anyone who wants to write to us can do so through our website. If they want to write to their dental practice, they can fill in a form online, which can be printed and despatched as a letter raising the issue(s) of concern. Taken together, telephone calls, emails and letters have resulted in more than 1,500 complaints which, in a year, suggests a need for the Service.

At least half of the incoming 5,000 calls have been about NHS care, suggesting that patients do not always know

where to take their concerns. We have redirected these patients to the appropriate NHS contact.

## THE PROCESS

Of course, all dental practices should have an effective complaints handling procedure with which every member of the dental team is familiar. And of course, as professionals, we all hope to do a competent and conscientious job. But inevitably things sometimes go wrong, and sometimes even the most effective complaints procedures fail. So if one of your patients remains dissatisfied, even after his or her complaint has been reviewed by you, what then?

When we receive a complaint, we first encourage the patient concerned to seek local resolution – to approach the practice itself either in person or in writing – as their first step, if they haven't already. This is always to be preferred. If you cannot resolve a complaint, and the patient returns to us, our complaints advisers seek to help. Of the 1,500-plus complainants, we referred nine out of ten back to their practice, and of those, fewer than one in five returned



The Dental Complaints Service homepage

to us with their complaint unresolved. Clearly, given the opportunity, dental professionals do resolve complaints successfully, although their complaints procedures may need to be given a higher profile within the practice.

If a practice cannot resolve the complaint, then the Dental Complaints Service's advisers will help both the patient and their dental professional to sort it out informally. At this stage (or the next), resolving complaints may involve explaining to a patient that there is no complaint to answer, or seeking from the dental professional:

- An apology
- A refund of fees
- A contribution by the practice towards the costs of remedial treatment.

Finally, if our advisers cannot facilitate a resolution, and if appropriate, we invite the patient and dental professional to a meeting of a complaints panel, locally and as soon as possible. Panels are the last step in the Service's attempts to resolve a complaint. They consist of three trained volunteers: two lay, and one dental professional.

Given that before they reach a panel, complaints must overcome two hurdles – reference back to a dental practice, and the attentions of the Service's complaints advisers – clearly only the more intractable complaints get to the point of a panel. Only 15 such panel meetings have been held to date, suggesting that both dental professionals and patients are flexible in, and committed to, resolving complaints, working together effectively to resolve their differences at an earlier stage. Four panel meetings concluded that there was no complaint to answer. Recommendations by panels have ranged from refunding fees and best practice in complaints handling to issuing treatment plans

and keeping contemporaneous records, as well as carrying out, or contributing financially towards, remedial treatment.

#### A USEFUL NEXT STEP

Across the UK, most complaints have been about dentists, with a few about other dental professionals. Most complaints concerned solely private treatment, but a few were about mixed NHS/private treatment, which we can usually help with. Treatment issues have included fillings, crowns and dentures, and service issues have included pain, cost and rudeness. Four out of five complaints cited pain or cost.

Most of the dental professionals who provided feedback rated the Service's performance as 'excellent' or 'good' and four out of five complainants offering feedback rated our quality of service in the same way. Dentists and other dental professionals who have been involved with the Dental Complaints Service tell us that it provides a useful 'next step' for the unsatisfied complainant, who otherwise might take their complaint to the courts, or their business elsewhere. Legal proceedings in particular can be prolonged, adversarial and expensive, for you as well as the patient. As for practices, the Dental Complaints Service can help them to manage complaints more positively and effectively and thereby maintain and improve relationships with patients.

If you think we could help resolve a complaint, please contact us on 08456 120540 (local rate), or visit [www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk](http://www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk), or email [info@dentalcomplaints.org.uk](mailto:info@dentalcomplaints.org.uk). These contact details also apply to patients.

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