

# Complaints: Could they be a business opportunity?

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The paternalistic dentist-patient relationship is no longer valid. It is a thing of the past condemned to the clinical waste of history. Patients in the UK today increasingly view themselves as consumers and frequently regard dentistry as a service accessible on demand. As consumers, our patients are ready to complain when they believe their expectations have not been fulfilled, and shop around for what they perceive to be the 'best deal'. This zeitgeist is compounded by the fact that dentistry can involve complex interventions for which patients have paid a significant amount of money.

I believe it is desirable that this evolution happened and that our patients feel empowered to raise their concerns. However, when you are on the receiving end of a letter of complaint, it is only natural to look back to the old days when 'the dentist knew best'.

The present status quo is unlikely to change. It remains a fact that most of us will receive unwelcome correspondence from a patient or their representatives during our careers, and probably on more than one occasion. This article presents a very positive view of this infrequent occurrence and should help you to see the opportunity that a complaint can sometimes bring.

### An opportunity to road-test the practice complaints protocol

Every practice should have a complaints protocol in place; the GDC makes this clear in its *Standards* document. Standard 5: You must have a clear and effective complaints procedure, states:

*'When faced with a complaint, a robust system will pay dividends for the time invested in its preparation. A tried and tested protocol will reduce the chances of the situation escalating and not only enhance patient satisfaction but reduce*

*the stress of engaging in a process with which you and the wider dental team are familiar.'*

Dental professionals, other staff and patients must know about the existence of your practice complaints procedure and understand how it works. If you are an employer, or you manage a team, you will want to ensure that all staff are trained in handling complaints and ensure that this training is reviewed and repeated on a regular basis. A complaint can expose system failures or deficiencies that may identify the previously unnoticed need for additional staff or resources.

### An opportunity for practice training and team building

Every complaint, no matter how unreasonable it might seem, provides a valuable opportunity for learning, both for the dentist individually and for the wider dental team.

Regular discussions at practice team meetings discussing any recent complaints can provide excellent learning points. Unless the whole team is engaged with the process, it is impossible to deliver a consistent approach to complaints, particularly in larger practices.

Staff, especially non-clinical staff, will enjoy a greater sense of job satisfaction if the importance of their individual role in the management of complaints is made clear. A minor complaint can quickly escalate if the patient is not signposted in the right direction and they go straight to the GDC.

### An opportunity to test your indemnity provider and learn how not to be afraid of complaints

A problem shared is indeed a problem halved; it is crucial that during a time of need you should feel well supported by your indemnity provider. At BDA Indemnity, all dento-legal advisors are dentists who are able to offer genuine empathy and be reassured you can speak confidentially without being criticised.

Being expertly guided through your case in a professional and efficient manner will undoubtedly leave you feeling less anxious if you should ever find yourself facing an unhappy patient in the future.

### An opportunity to build better patient relations

Studies have shown that a complaint handled sensitively and promptly can generate more patient loyalty and trust than existed before the negative incident. This is because it provides an opportunity to demonstrate to your patients that you really do care about them.

The cost of recruiting a new patient is much greater than the cost of retaining existing patients. It makes good business sense to handle complaints sensitively and endeavour to create a favourable outcome for the patient. Of course, there will also be some situations where the professional relationship is unsalvageable, but you won't know which ones until you try.

Businesses pay handsomely for feedback surveys; complaints are free to collect and often provide the best feedback! For example, close examination of a practice's complaints folder can often reveal a common theme at their core. A regular review of the complaints folder can prevent re-occurrence and improve the existing quality of service.

### Population of your PDP and better targeting of CPD choices

It is a mandatory requirement of the GDC's Enhanced CPD scheme to have and maintain a Personal Development Plan (PDP). This helps to assure the GDC that your CPD activity supports your work as a dental professional. An episode of reflection forms part of this process. A complaint offers the perfect opportunity for reflection; for example, was there something you could have done differently which may have prevented the complaint? Is there a CPD course you can attend which targets the root cause of the complaint e.g. communicating with patients?

### Summary

Complaints are part of dentistry today; it is futile to only view them negatively. A well-handled complaint can be a fantastic practice builder and positively impact the care provided to future patients. ♦

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