



Preparing your practice for COVID-19 complaints



The pause in routine treatment caused by the pandemic may lead to complaints from patients, warns **Sue N'Jie**, Dental Defence Union (DDU) dento-legal adviser.

The resumption of routine dentistry has meant adapting to a whole new way of practice, as well as trying to keep up with the latest guidance on safe operating procedures. Most patients have been understanding about the unavoidable compromises in dental provision during the pandemic. However, some patients will have concerns about the impact on their oral health. As a result, practices may find themselves having to respond to complaints from patients arising from the pandemic.

During the lockdown, complaints numbers were a little down on what we'd normally see, but patients and their relatives continued to raise concerns. At the Dental Defence Union

(DDU) we were notified by members of 360 complaints between March and June this year. It's fair to say we expected a bigger drop given the public's grateful recognition of the incredibly challenging circumstances and that routine treatments ceased during the lockdown.

Some complaints have the potential to become clinical negligence claims which is why it is also vital that the government acts to ensure all NHS healthcare professionals are exempt from COVID-19 related litigation, and the additional distress and anxiety it inevitably causes (<https://bit.ly/2EjrC11>).

Causes of complaint

Common subjects for complaints related to the pandemic include:



- Problems with accessing urgent treatment during the lockdown
- Lack of availability of appointments
- Concern about limited treatments available.

It is inevitable that the circumstances of the pandemic have led to a change in the types of complaints a practice may receive. For example, patients who are already anxious and frustrated may be more likely to respond negatively when making an appointment and having to undergo a more detailed triage, which they may perceive as staff being difficult or obstructive. In addition, patients caught mid-treatment at the start of lockdown may have particular concerns about the detrimental effect of delays on their oral health.

However unwelcome complaints are in the current situation, practices still need to respond to any complaint promptly and professionally. Dental professionals who allow complaints to fall down their list of priorities will find them more difficult to resolve and potentially find themselves facing scrutiny by an Ombudsman or the Dental Complaints Service.

The DDU has put together the following advice to help practices manage COVID-related complaints.

‘More than ever, the smooth running of the practice relies on excellent teamwork, working closely together to respond professionally and consistently when patients have concerns.’

Follow your existing practice complaints procedure

As far as possible, your approach should be consistent with your published complaints process and in line with General Dental Council (GDC) standards. Be sure to retain copies of complaints correspondence and relevant documents which should be stored separately from the complainant’s clinical records. This will be invaluable if you need assistance from your dental defence organisation or you are called on to justify your actions.

Tell patients about possible delays

In the current health crisis, your practice may not have the resources to respond to a complaint within the timescale set out in your complaints process. If this is the case, amend your acknowledgement letter accordingly so the complainant knows what to expect - most complainants will accept unavoidable delays, provided they have been advised in advance. However, it is still a good idea to have a clear audit trail of your communications in case the complainant takes the matter further.

Manage patient expectations

Be proactive in communicating with patients to manage their expectations as this is the surest way to reduce the chances of a complaint in the first place.

Review your website and practice answerphone so patients have a consistent and

current message about how they can make an appointment and the measures you are taking to protect them. Similarly, the limitation of treatment options and possible delays in the management of referrals should be explained in advance. Although much of this is outside of your control, the GDC expects dental professionals to ‘give patients the information they need, in a way they can understand, so that they can make informed decisions.’

Work as a team

Now more than ever, the smooth running of the practice relies on excellent teamwork, working closely together to respond professionally and consistently when patients have concerns. Ensure frontline staff have been fully trained in how to handle complaints and understand the practice complaints procedure.

At the same time, bear in mind that as the practice’s first point of contact, reception staff, could be more exposed to anger or aggression from some complainants. They should feel able to call on support from colleagues if they feel threatened.

Encourage patient feedback

Finally, we recommend you continue to encourage patient feedback as you are developing your new surgery systems. This will help ensure you can pick up possible issues before they become the subject of a complaint and reassure patients that you are intent on providing the best possible service.

Earn two hours of CPD and improve your complaint handling skills by completing the DDU’s online complaints course at www.theddu.com/learn.

This information was correct at the time of writing. To keep up-to-date with the latest information visit <https://www.theddu.com/coronavirus>.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0408-8>