



# The impact of COVID-19 on dental professionals

**Leo Briggs**, Deputy Head of the Dental Defence Union (DDU), discusses some of the ways in which the pandemic has impacted upon dental professionals.

In a recent DDU survey, 95% of the dental professionals surveyed stated that patients have been understanding of the changes that have been made during the pandemic. While it is good that dental professionals feel the majority of patients have been understanding, there are currently still concerns within dentistry.

## Dealing with a complaint

Indeed, the same survey found that 60% of respondents were concerned about facing a complaint, claim or General Dental Council (GDC) investigation relating to the pandemic. In its recent *The impact of COVID-19 on oral health and dentistry* report,<sup>1</sup> the GDC also recognises that dental professionals have increased fears of regulatory or legal action being taken. In response the GDC, along with other professional regulators, have published a 'joint statement'<sup>2</sup> on how they would regulate during the pandemic, stressing the use of professional judgement<sup>3</sup> to assess risk to deliver safe care that is informed by any relevant guidance, and the values and principles set out in professional standards<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the challenging circumstances, we would still recommend practices to respond promptly and professionally to any complaint received. As far as possible, your approach should be consistent with your published

complaints process and in line with GDC standards.

If it is not possible to respond to a complaint within the timescale set out in your complaints process, amend your acknowledgement accordingly so the complainant knows what to expect and keep the lines of communication well and truly open.

## Staying up-to-date with guidance

So far, according to our research, 59% of dental professionals have found it possible to stay up-to-date with the latest guidance issued during the pandemic.

The frequent updates to guidance mean it is important to check the relevant websites regularly (or delegate this to a trusted colleague), rather than rely on printed information that may quickly become outdated. It's also a good idea to keep a log so you can demonstrate what you have done to stay up-to-date.

The guidelines are recommendations which are designed to assist dental professionals with their decision-making process and the GDC<sup>3</sup> has recognised that the guidance will not cover every situation. They also state that 'we understand that in highly challenging circumstances, professionals may need to depart from established procedures to care for patients and that should concerns

be raised, relevant environmental and human factors would be taken into account<sup>5</sup>.

However, if you depart from the guidance, it is helpful to demonstrate that you've taken the guidelines into account and note your reasons for departing from them.

## The importance of mental health and wellbeing

The pandemic has had a significant impact on people's mental health and it is important to consider your own wellbeing as well as your colleagues'. A DDU survey into the health and wellbeing of dental professionals found that 68% of dental professionals feel that their stress and anxiety levels have increased since the pandemic; 52% feel they are unable to spend adequate time with patients and 49% feel they are unable to do their jobs effectively.

If you think your mental health is being impacted then seek support from trusted friends, family members, colleagues, your professional association, or from:

The Samaritans (<https://www.samaritans.org/>)

The DDU (<https://www.theddu.com/>); DDU members have access to a 24-hour health and wellbeing helpline.

The impact of the pandemic is likely to be felt for the foreseeable future particularly while restrictions continue and change with rising and falling infection rates. These pressures are being felt by many within the profession so it is important to remember to contact your dental defence organisation for support and advice about the dental implications of the pandemic.

## References

1. General Dental Council. The impacts of COVID-19 on oral health and dentistry. Available at: <https://www.gdc-uk.org/information-standards-guidance/covid-19/the-impacts-of-covid-19> (accessed January 2021).
2. General Dental Council. How we will continue to regulate in light of novel coronavirus (Covid-19). 3 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.gdc-uk.org/news-blogs/news/detail/2020/03/03/how-we-will-continue-to-regulate-in-light-of-novel-coronavirus> (accessed January 2021).
3. General Dental Council. COVID-19: GDC guidance for dental professionals. Last updated 26 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.gdc-uk.org/information-standards-guidance/covid-19/covid-19-guidance-from-the-gdc> (accessed January 2021).

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