Equality, diversity and inclusion

Priya Sharma¹ says that having a diversity

and inclusion policy in your dental practice is more than a paper exercise and demands practical application.

What is equality?

According to the Government 'The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society'. There are nine protected characteristics in the Act: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage/civil partnership, pregnancy/maternity, race, religion/belief, sex and sexual orientation. The aim of the Act is to protect everyone against discrimination, harassment or victimisation in the workplace and in society.

What does the General Dental Council say?

The General Dental Council's (GDC's) *Standards for the dental team¹* states the following:

'Standard 1.6

You must treat patients fairly, as individuals and without discrimination

1.6.1 You must not discriminate against patients on the grounds of:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation.

You must also ensure that you do not discriminate against patients or groups of patients for any other reasons such as nationality, special needs, health, lifestyle or any other consideration.

1.6.2 You must be aware of and adhere to all your responsibilities as set out in relevant equalities legislation.

1.6.3 You must consider patients' disabilities and make reasonable adjustments

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to allow them to receive care which meets their needs. If you cannot make reasonable adjustments to treat a patient safely, you should consider referring them to a colleague.

1.6.4 You must not express your personal beliefs (including political, religious or moral beliefs) to patients in any way that exploits their vulnerability or could cause them distress.²

What are the Care Quality Commission's views?

It probably goes without saying that the Care Quality Commission (CQC) would expect all dental providers to treat both patients and colleagues equally.

According to CQC's Regulation 10 Dignity and Respect:²

'10(2)(c) having due regard to any relevant protected characteristics (as defined in section 149(7) of the Equality Act 2010) of the service user

- People using services must not be discriminated against in any way and the provider must take account of protected characteristics, set out in the Equality Act 2010
- This means that providers must not discriminate, harass or victimise people because of these protected characteristics. This includes direct and indirect discrimination, which is described in the Equality Act 2010
- Providers must also make sure that they have due regard to people's protected characteristics in the way in which they meet all other regulatory requirements. For example, in relation to care and treatment reflecting the person's preferences in Regulation 9(1)(c) or in relation to community involvement in relation to Regulation 10(2)(b).²

Why do we need to comply?

It is imperative to adhere to The Equality Act not only because it is legislation and it is a fundamental tenet by both the GDC and CQC, but more importantly because it is the right thing to do. Equality ensures that all members of the dental team and patients of the practice will be treated equally in status, rights and/or opportunities.

No one should have less of an opportunity due to a certain characteristic; everyone is on an equal platform where the opportunities should be identical.

It is much more than behaviour and habit; rather, equality includes eliminating bias and discrimination whilst removing barriers and ensuring equal opportunity.

What is unconscious bias?

Generally, it can be said that human beings intuitively decide what another human is like. The human brain is hard-wired to instinctively make a judgement which in turn affects our attitudes and behaviours to other people. An infinite number of biases are created, automated and held by the brain at a subconscious level. This leads to a propagation of stereotypes regardless of how non-judgemental and fair we consider ourselves to be. Indeed, these are extremely difficult to eradicate because the bias is so deeply ingrained in our world view.

It is important to confront unconscious bias and the place to start is by accepting that we all have preconceived ideas about certain people, ideas or things. Next, one

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must be mindful not to make quick 'gut-instinct' decisions. Simple awareness of the nine protected characteristics will aid in alleviating unconscious bias. It is also helpful to get to know people from all walks of life; this leads to a better understanding. Recognising and honestly accepting unconscious bias will help in addressing it.

How do stereotypes factor in?

A standard textbook definition of stereotype states that it is 'a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing'. This involves grouping individuals according to particular characteristics and making a judgement about a whole group of individuals. The very definition makes it obvious that this is not possible and will lead to incorrect assumptions. Preconceived notions will lead to barriers. Stereotypes are learned either explicitly or implicitly and then subsequently reinforced. It is paramount that society breaks these stereotypes down in order to ensure equality, whether in a dental practice or society at large.

What is discrimination?

According to Amnesty International:

'Discrimination occurs when a person is unable to enjoy his or her human rights or other legal rights on an equal basis with others because of an unjustified distinction made in policy, law or treatment'. According to the Government it is against the law to discriminate against anyone due to the nine protected characteristics. All individuals should be protected from discrimination in all realms of societal involvement. Yet, it still occurs!

Citizens Advice states that direct discrimination is being '...treated unfairly by someone simply because of who you are...'.³ It can be because of who you are, who someone thinks you are and/or someone you are with. Indirect discrimination, however,

involves '...times when you may be treated in the same way as everybody else, but it has a different and worse effect on you because of who you are'.

Generally, this is more difficult to identify as there is a general policy or rule which appears to apply to everybody equally. However, it places people who share a protected characteristic at a disadvantage and therefore it places an individual personally at a disadvantage.

What is harassment?

Harassment is unwanted conduct directed to an individual based on the nine protected characteristics. This may involve behaviour that intimidates, humiliates or offends an individual. Harassment may not be obvious to others in the same environment. It can range from bullying, derogatory verbal comments, non-verbal communication, facial expressions, jokes, sarcasm and so forth.

What is diversity?

Every human is unique. Diversity is recognising our individual differences and

valuing each individual's characteristics, traits, backgrounds, skills, and experience. In the dental practice a diverse dental team is most certainly an asset. It allows the development and enhancement of understanding between individuals. Diversity will create a comprehensive and

members of the dental team, patients and anyone that walks into the practice must be treated fairly at all times regardless of any protected characteristics, background, life experience and such forth. This will increase the public confidence in your practice and the team.

you looked at it and actually considered it and its implications? Concepts of diversity and inclusion are more than a paper exercise, which demands practical application. This will bring awareness and identify any areas of concern. Address areas of unconscious bias. Ensure that all members of the dental team, regardless of their role, receive diversity and inclusion training. All initiatives and programmes should be shared with staff, perhaps during regular staff meetings. It is important to review, measure progress and consider what could improve.

What is the dental practice's responsibility?

The dental practice must remain fair, equal and supportive of all individuals. Patients and the dental team must be treated fairly, regardless of who they are. Fair and just recruitment policies must exist and be conformed to. Working conditions should be the same for all members of the dental team. The time to make change is NOW.

References

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strong dental team, each individual bringing with them unique characteristics that will enhance and add value to the practice. In the media diversity is often wrongly equated to race and multicultural factors however it actually involves a wide range of constituents such as race, ethnicity, age, sex, sexuality, education, background amongst other characteristics.

Diversity in dentistry is not only to have a diverse team but also to have equal opportunities and participation in the work environment. A diverse dental team will certainly enhance the practice but also be a mirror reflection of the society we live in.

Recently there has been much interest in a diverse work environment. Large companies have set up incentives and are dedicating a large amount of resource in the area. Generally, dental practices are much smaller so it may be easier and enriching to diversify the team.

A diverse dental team can provide caring and optimal dental care ensuring that patients can relate to the dental team. All

How does inclusion works?

Whilst inclusion is closely related to diversity, in its own right it is a discrete concept. In summary, it is how diversity works practically. Ideally, each member of a diverse dental team should be treated respectfully and fairly. All resources and opportunities must be provided to all team members. Each member should be able to contribute fully and voice their opinions. This ensures that everyone not only feels valued but also adds value to the practice.

It is mandatory that everyone believes in the inclusive culture at work. Creating an environment where there is always two-sided open communication will lead to a transparent and accountable work environment. Mutual respect and understanding should underlie all interactions with colleagues and patients alike.

Where do we start?

Most dental practices will have an equality and diversity policy. When was the last time