Certifying a patient for DIY orthodontic treatment

Eric Easson, dento-legal adviser at the Dental Defence Union (DDU) discusses a case involving direct-to-consumer orthodontic treatment.

Recently there has been a rise in direct-to-consumer orthodontic treatment being offered by companies to cater for patients wanting orthodontic treatment at a reduced cost and without having to attend regular appointments.

Increasingly dental professionals are being asked for their opinion by patients thinking of using such services. Colleagues are being asked to confirm patients' teeth are suitable for the treatment plan being offered, often by completing forms provided by the company due to provide treatment. This raises dento-legal issues for the dental professionals concerned, as can be seen in the anonymised case below.

Patient wants your opinion on orthodontic treatment

A member contacted the DDU for advice when a long-standing patient of the practice wanted them to complete a 'suitability for treatment' form provided by a direct-to-consumer orthodontic provider. Although

the patient was a regular attendee, they had high treatment needs. They had a moderate periodontal disease risk with frequent lapses in the quality of their oral hygiene, partly as a result of long periods away from home for work. They also had a moderate to high caries risk despite the use of a high fluoride toothpaste and regular dietary advice because the quality of their diet would fluctuate while working away from home. As a result, they had a heavily restored dentition and required regular hygiene treatment to maintain periodontal health.

The patient explained they had recently become self-conscious about the appearance of their overlapping and overcrowding teeth and were considering orthodontic treatment. A colleague of the patient had treatment with a direct-to-consumer orthodontic provider and was happy with the results. He explained to the patient that it was cost-effective and convenient because aligners were posted and treatment did not involve regular appointments.

The DDU member was concerned because the forms he was asked to complete

requested comment on the patient's suitability for a proposed orthodontic treatment plan. The member did not provide orthodontic treatment and, although he was able to discuss the general principles of the treatment and some of the systems that could be used, he did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to comment on a particular treatment plan proposed to meet the patient's aims.

DDU advice

The DDU advised the member that if they were unable to comment on a patient's suitability for a particular orthodontic system, it would be advisable not to complete a statement, or declaration, to that effect. They could explain to the patient that they did not wish to obstruct the patient from pursuing treatment, but they were unable to comment on the suitability of a particular treatment plan because it was outside their area of expertise. Instead, it was advised they provide the patient with general information about the types of orthodontic treatment available, including those available in specialist practice and by general dental practice providers. They

should explain the potential risks associated with orthodontic treatment with the patient's individual caries and periodontal risk status and offer to organise a referral for the patient to attend an orthodontic consultation so they could consider the alternatives available to them with a provider of orthodontic treatment with expertise.

dental care remotely¹ and updated its statement on direct-to-consumer orthodontic treatment.² This makes it clear that these services fall within the legal definition of dentistry so can only be performed by dentists and dental care professionals who are registered with the GDC. All dental professionals must adhere to the GDC's *Standards for the dental team*.³

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Forms to complete

The DDU member explained to the patient that, although they were able to organise a referral to a known orthodontic provider, they were unable to complete the suitability form for the direct-to-consumer orthodontic provider. The member also explained that the patient should consider carefully what level of support the orthodontic provider would give the patient if difficulties were experienced. They should also make sure they were aware of the retention advised following treatment, and what level of review of the result may be offered.

The member explained that although they were unable to complete the forms as requested, they were happy to provide a summary of the patient's current oral health status, including the periodontal and caries risk status. Alternatively, the patient could have copies of their clinical records to use as needed.

Through a sympathetic and careful explanation, the dental practitioner advised us that the patient was grateful for the advice they provided. This was because they did not realise the level of support that may be required for orthodontic treatment and how it may impact on the other factors such as their fillings and gum health. With the additional information the member provided the patient was able to make an informed choice about orthodontic treatment and ask the relevant questions of the provider.

The General Dental Council GDC has issued advice to registrants on providing

Further advice on this topic can be found on the DDU website⁴ and members are welcome to contact us for further advice and guidance.

References

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