



Looking out for each other

Lesley Taylor, dento-legal adviser at the Dental Defence Union (DDU), discusses mental health and wellbeing support for all dental professionals.

Work is such a big part of life for dental professionals that it's inextricably linked with mental health. If you are in a rewarding career and surrounded by supportive practice colleagues, you're sure to be in a much better place than someone who feels stressed and unappreciated.

Good mental health also means we can focus on being the best we can be for patients, while a distracted, anxious or unhappy member of the dental team is at greater risk of making mistakes which might lead to complaints and claims. Occupational stress, burnout and fatigue are listed as one of the most common occupational hazards for healthcare workers by the World Health Organisation, which says: 'Prolonged job stress may cause burnout, chronic fatigue, absenteeism, high staff turnover, reduced patient satisfaction, and increased diagnosis and treatment errors'.¹

Research by the BDA in 2019² suggested that dentists may be more vulnerable to job stress and their consumption of alcohol and suicidal thoughts were higher than in the general population, even before the pandemic. As far as dental care professionals are concerned, a systematic review³ of health and wellbeing in the *Primary Dental Journal* (the College of General Dentistry) identified a number of factors that might affect wellbeing including career level, job specification, working environment and opportunities for CPD. However, it concluded that 'there is currently very limited evidence on the key determinants of health and wellbeing of clinical DCPs within the UK' and that further research is required.

Although this area may not have received much academic attention before now, the General Dental Council's (GDC's) standards guidance⁴ has always required dental professionals to consider our own health, support colleagues in the dental team and raise concerns if we believe something is amiss. Here

are three ways we can all play our part:

Recognise and act on warning signs

According to Rory O'Connor of the Dentists' Health Support Trust (DHST),⁵ a charity which supports dentists with mental health and/or addiction, these could include changes to sleeping or eating habits, becoming short tempered, difficulties in concentration, negative thoughts or a sudden loss of interest in work or hobbies. In some cases, dental professionals may also resort to unhelpful coping mechanisms such as alcohol or other types of self-medicating, for example, sleeping pills, which could make matters worse.

If you notice these symptoms in yourself or someone draws them to your attention, it is important not to ignore them. While the first step may feel hard, there is a way back to a rewarding career.

Get support

Once a problem has been identified, there are many sources of support,⁶ from the DHST and the NHS Practitioner Health Programme⁷ to the dental professional's own GP. The UK Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors (COPDEND) has also produced a detailed guide to Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team⁸ which includes self-care tips and advice on how to help others.

It should be reassuring to know that the GDC is generally sympathetic towards registrants with health problems, providing they co-operate with health assessments, show insight and don't put patients at risk.

Look out for colleagues

If someone doesn't seem their usual self or you notice they are having a tough day, ask if they are okay. You might be the first person they are willing to open up to but even if they shrug off your concerns, make sure they know the door is open if they change their mind.

While you can't force someone to confide

in you, you have a responsibility to raise concerns if they pose a risk to patients. Talk to your manager or a senior colleague in the first instance.

References

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