

Managing patient expectations and potential complaints



Leo Briggs, deputy head of the Dental Defence Union (DDU), discusses how to manage patient expectations and potential complaints with regards to accessibility of care.

Unfortunately, lack of accessibility within healthcare is a popular topic in the media and as such, there seems to be an increase in patient complaints arising out of limited access, in both the primary and secondary care settings.

Consequently, some patients are becoming angry and frustrated with the need for urgent dental care arising from the backlog. Unfortunately, these frustrations are often directed at all members of the dental team, which is compounded by reports of a shortage of registered dental professionals to fill vacancies.

There are different reasons why access might be an issue within dental practices. For example, some dental professionals within a practice focus on specific treatments, such as orthodontics, dental implants, or facial aesthetics, and it's not uncommon that they are the only clinician who provides this type of treatment.

Communicating accessibility challenges to patients

As ever, managing the expectations of patients at the initial point of contact is very important to help avoid a complaint. To do this effectively, practices can implement clear guidance for all team members.

- Consider having set emergency slots each day to try and assist with urgent care needs of patients and avoid adding time pressures by having to fit patients in between your other appointments
- At the time of making an examination appointment, make it clear to the patient what the average waiting time for follow up care is likely to be
- Have a well organised and transparent waiting list in operation and explain to patients that they will be prioritised based

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on the urgency of their treatment needs

- Clearly explain the waiting lists in your area for onward referrals and how this is outside of your control
- If you need to cancel an appointment, be clear with the patient why this is necessary and explain how the rescheduling will be prioritised
- Ensure that the practice is delivering against its full NHS contracted sessions so that no criticism can be raised about favouring private patients over and above the needs of NHS patients
- When offering private options, be careful that this is not seen to be selling a way to 'queue jump'
- Provide clear timelines for elective/ cosmetic work, such as limited treatment orthodontics.

If patients know that you empathise with their frustration, and you can reassure them that you're dealing with them fairly and working as efficiently you can, it's often possible to bring them inside and minimise the number of complaints received.

Receiving a complaint

However, if a patient does decide to make a complaint, it is important to have a clear complaint procedure in place that is understood and followed by the whole dental team.

The type of complaints dental practices are having to deal with include:

- Capacity issues leading to not being able to accept new patients or patients who have not attended regularly – both NHS and private
- Lack of access for both emergency care and routine examination appointments
- Delays between examination appointments and being seen for completion of the treatment plan.

If a patient is unhappy about their ability to access care, handling any complaint quickly and professionally should go a long way towards avoiding escalation. It usually helps to empathise with patients about their frustration and explain what steps are being taken to address any access issues.

Remember that verbal complaints are just as valid as written complaints. Don't insist that patients put their complaint in writing, as this might encourage them to complain elsewhere. It's also important to have a clear and effective complaints procedure that patients can be directed to, and that all practice staff are trained in and familiar with.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-023-1856-8>