

The importance of foundation training for dental professionals



John Makin, Head of the Dental Defence Union (DDU), explains why so-called soft skills are just as important as core, clinical skills.

While clinical skills are obviously vital to the success of a dental professional, other skills are also required to become a competent practitioner in dentistry.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, these skills are covered in the Dental Foundation Training Curriculum¹ under the communication, professionalism and management & leadership domains. In Scotland, these same domains are included in the Vocational Training Curriculum.² Although these curricula are designed for newly qualified dental professionals, it is important to develop and maintain these skills throughout your entire career.

Communication

Dentistry is a people business and effective communication is a vital skill for any member of the dental team. It not only helps contribute to improving patient satisfaction but also helps to reduce the risk of complaints. Unfortunately, a breakdown in communication can be an underlying factor in complaints even if it is not highlighted by the patient as their main concern.

There is also an ethical obligation for dental professionals to communicate effectively with patients, as set out in principle two of the GDC 'Standards for the dental team'.³ As part of these standards, patients can expect:

- To receive full, clear, and accurate information that they can understand,

before, during and after treatment, so that they can make informed decisions in partnership with the people providing their care

- A clear explanation of the treatment, possible outcomes and what they can expect
- To know how much their treatment will cost before it starts, and to be told about any changes
- Communication that they can understand
- To know the names of those providing their care.

Good communication is a two-way street between the patient and the dental professional. Listening to patients and understanding their wishes and expectations

is as important as what is said. By making the effort to communicate clearly and concisely with patients, individuals can minimise the risk of a complaint and doing so can often help to resolve complaints at an early stage.

Professionalism

We all know what we mean by professionalism, however it's a concept that is sometimes difficult to express. A simple definition is 'doing the right thing even when no one is looking' – we can all remember having to decide oneself, without the comfort of a tutor's check and sign off, whether that first item of treatment done in practice after qualification was satisfactory.

Principle 9.1.2 of the GDC's Standards for the dental team also discusses professionalism when it states that 'you must not make disparaging remarks about another member of the dental team in front of patients. Any concerns you may have about a colleague should be raised through the proper channels'.

Professional behaviours extend to maintaining professional knowledge and skills via CPD and professional development activity and to conduct both at work and in some aspect of personal life to maintain public confidence in both the individual and the wider profession.

Management and leadership

Principle Six of Standards for the dental team describes how dentists should 'work with colleagues in a way that serves the interests of patients'. It is this collaborative approach that further leads the GDC to state that all dental professionals 'must treat colleagues fairly and with respect in all situations and all forms of interaction and communication'.

Consequently, dental professionals who manage a team should ensure the team has clear, shared aims and that all team members understand their roles and responsibilities and do not feel pressured to carry out a task if they say they are unable to do so.

Furthermore, it is important that dentists who are team leaders ensure that all staff members are indemnified, qualified, registered with the GDC where required, and have access to appropriate training to ensure they are on track to comply with their CPD requirements. Individual and team performance should be monitored and reviewed.

It's also important to provide further training for staff in how to respond to medical emergencies, and practise together regularly. The GDC says there must always be a second person available to deal with medical emergencies when treatment takes place.

Team leaders should also ensure that team members have a way of raising concerns⁴ – for example, where there are doubts about colleagues' health, behaviour or competence. Staff should also be trained in complaints handling and be aware of the practice's complaints procedure.

Good time management can help dental professionals work efficiently and can also make life easier as keeping patients waiting can result in anxious, irritated patients who may then complain. If you then put yourself under pressure to 'catch up', you may miss something important about a patient's condition or make a mistake.

In conclusion, a combination of good communication, professionalism, leadership, and clinical skills is likely to lead to a successful well-run practice where clinical standards are high and patient complaints few and far between.

As such it's important as a dental professional to make time to develop these skills through CPD and personal development.

The DDU offers a wide range of CPD modules based on real-life dento-legal dilemmas. To learn more, visit: <https://www.theddu.com/guidance-and-advice/dento-legal-dilemmas>.

References

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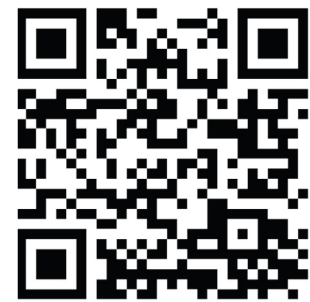
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