



Communicating effectively with patients and colleagues



David Lauder, dento-legal adviser at the Dental Defence Union (DDU), explains the importance of maintaining good communication with patients and colleagues.

Effective communication is a vital skill for any member of the dental team when dealing with both patients and colleagues. Good communication enhances patient interactions by increasing the likelihood of improving patient satisfaction and decreasing the chances of a complaint.

Consistent and clear communication skills between dental professionals are also vital in ensuring good patient care. It is important for all members of the dental team to recognise and respect the roles and views of each other so there can be good working relationships within the team.

Communicating with patients

Unfortunately, a breakdown in communication can be a significant factor in a complaint. For example, an allegation of inadequate advice being provided, the appropriateness of the treatment, or the quality of service provided by the dental practice can all involve a breakdown in communication.

Good communication is a continuous process between the patient and the dental team. Listening to patients and understanding their wishes and expectations is as important as what you say. By making the effort to communicate clearly and concisely with patients, practices can minimise the risk of

a complaint and doing so can often help to resolve complaints at an early stage.

Dental professionals also have an ethical obligation to communicate effectively with patients, as set out in principle two of the GDC Standards for the dental team.¹ 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.’

The GDC also expects dental professionals to tell patients if treatment is guaranteed, under what circumstances and for how long. However, we would advise against offering a guarantee or warranty, which have specific legal meanings. It’s acceptable to give an undertaking to refund fees or to repeat treatment free of charge if the treatment fails within a specified period.

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When putting this into practice, it is important to check and manage the patient’s expectations of what can be achieved. To do this, it’s vital that you make a full record of consent discussions in the patient’s notes, and check their understanding of the procedure, what’s involved and what they can expect before, during and after treatment.

If a patient is unhappy with any aspect of their treatment, communicate in a polite and professional manner. Be prepared to apologise if things have gone wrong – an apology is not the same as admitting liability.

Communicating with colleagues

It’s common for patients to receive care from more than one member of the dental team, so to maintain the best quality of care for patients, all members of the dental team must communicate clearly and effectively with each other. Every effort should be made to be approachable and open so that colleagues are comfortable discussing a patient’s treatment with each other. The GDC also states that dental professionals treat each other ‘fairly and with respect, in all situations and all forms of interaction and communication.’²

When you ask someone else to carry out

treatment, give them the information they need and make it easy for them to raise any queries. Check they have understood your request, as appropriate. Try to be specific about terms of engagement, quality assurance and deadlines.

When making a referral, check the referral letter and any records that you plan to send with the referral. Specify the details for the referral and the expected outcome. If you receive a referral letter where the details are unclear, contact the referring dental professional for clarification.

A practice protocol will help make sure all relevant information is documented clearly when patients are referred.

Finally, take time to reflect on any adverse incidents caused by a failure in communication with a colleague. Consider whether steps need to be taken to improve communication within the practice – for example, with staff attending professional training courses. Shared learning can be a valuable exercise.

To access the full library of dento-legal guidance and advice from the DDU, visit <https://www.theddu.com/guidance-and-advice>.

References

1. General Dental Council. Focus on Standards. Principle Two. Communicate effectively with patients. Available at: <https://standards.gdc-uk.org/pages/principle2/principle2.aspx> (accessed May 2024).
2. General Dental Council. Focus on Standards. Principle Six. Work with colleagues in a way that serves the interests of patients. Available at: <https://standards.gdc-uk.org/pages/principle6/principle6.aspx> (accessed May 2024).

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-024-2653-8>

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