

OPENING DOORS

GDC registration coming your way

For the first time in history the General Dental Council is opening its doors to the entire clinical team, reports **Arveen Bajaj**.

The UK dental team is facing one of its most far-reaching changes in its history with the expansion of General Dental Council (GDC) registration. In the UK, thousands of dental nurses, dental technicians, clinical dental technicians, maxillofacial prosthetists and technologists and orthodontic therapists will be affected by the registration, which is set begin sometime in 2004.

But many want to know, if dental teams have gone for decades without being registered, why start now?

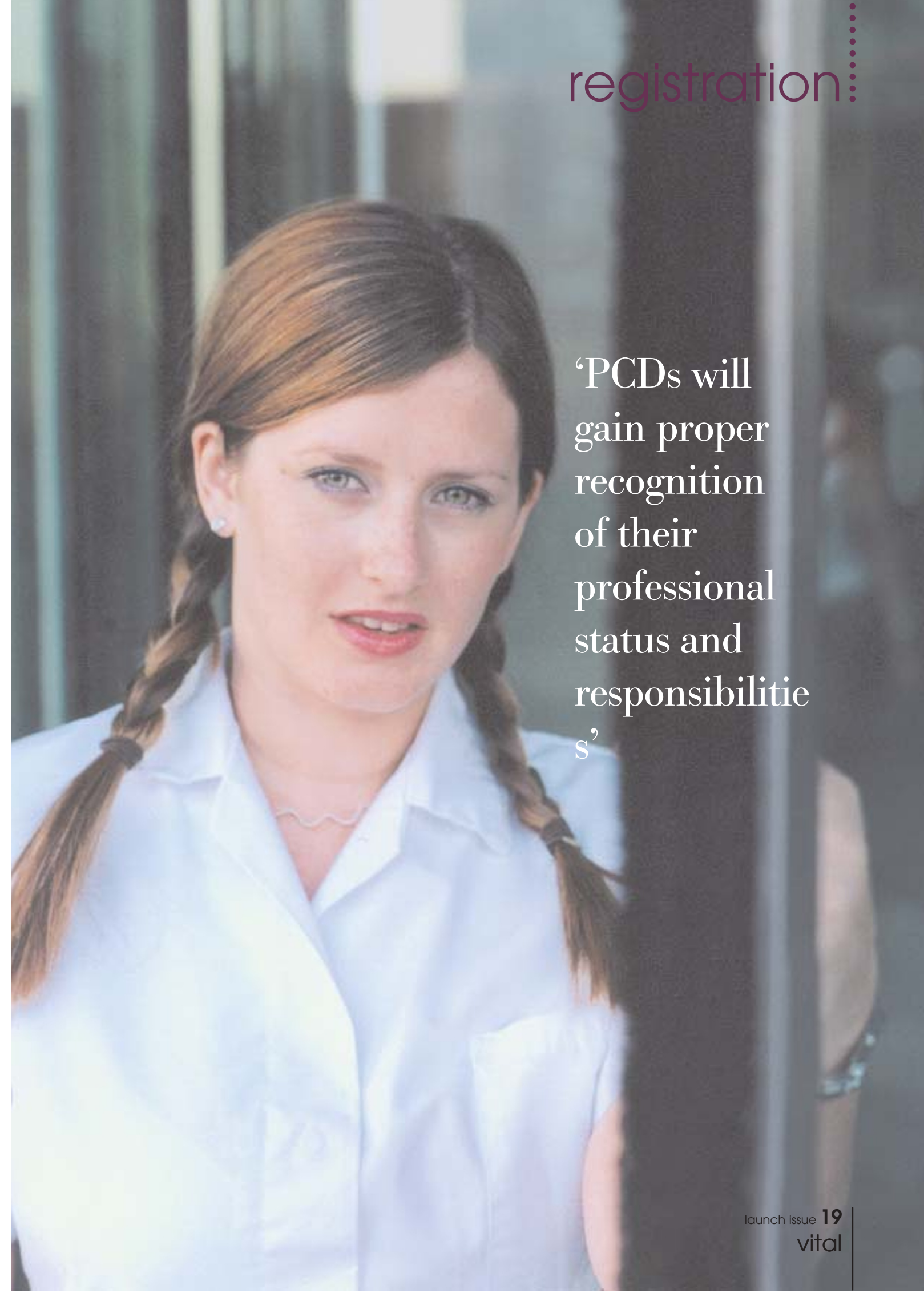
The answer lies, according to the GDC, in not only better protection for the thousands of patients seen in surgeries all over the UK, but in dental teams gaining proper recognition of their professional status and responsibility.

As the regulatory body of the dental profession, the GDC's role is to protect patients.

It does this by keeping up-to-date lists of properly qualified dentists, dental hygienists and dental therapists, setting high standards of dental practice and conduct, maintaining high standards of dental education, requiring dentists to take part in continuing professional development (CPD) to keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date and taking action if there is doubt about whether a dental professional should be allowed to continue practising dentistry.

Currently, the GDC's powers – which are given to it by Parliament – cover all registered dentists, dental hygienists and dental therapists, but, in the future – probably late 2004 – they will apply to all registered PCDs. It will then be compulsory for dental nurses, dental technicians, clinical dental technicians, maxillofacial prosthetists and technologists and orthodontic therapists to register with the GDC.

‘PCDs will gain proper recognition of their professional status and responsibilities’





Being on the register

Being on the register will mean a number of things for the registrant. According to the GDC, by having a register the standard of education received by all members of the dental team can be guaranteed, and PCDs will gain proper recognition of their professional status and responsibilities. They will also benefit from improved educational and training opportunities.

This guaranteed standard of education being received will then increase protection for the public, helping them feel confident in all members of the dental profession and will also mean that PCDs will be responsible and accountable for their actions.

As the titles 'dental hygienist', 'dental therapist', 'dental nurse', 'dental technician', 'clinical dental technician', 'maxillofacial prosthodontist and technologist' and 'orthodontic therapist' will be reserved by law for those PCDs who become registered, anyone wishing to use these titles will have to be registered with the GDC, otherwise they will be breaking the law.

What you need to join the register

The GDC asserts that entry onto the PCD register will be on the basis of training and approved qualifications recognised and regulated by it. However, for a period of two years from the opening of the register in 2004, PCDs who do not have recognised qualifications but have experience or have previously awarded qualifications, will be able to apply to register.

So, if you are a PCD who had years of experience but no qualifications, it does not mean that you are not eligible to register. When the PCD register opens, there will be a two-year 'transitional period' during which PCDs can apply under these conditions, and the GDC will assess whether or not your training and experience equip you to carry out the duties of a registered PCD.

Dental nurses will need four years full-time experience in the past eight years or the part-time equivalent and dental technicians will need seven years full-time experience or the part-time equivalent.

After the end of the two-year 'transitional period', the GDC makes it clear that PCDs will not be able to join the register based on experience alone, as they will need the approved qualification. They recommend that those who do not have qualifications should apply for registration as soon as the PCD register opens next year.

Dental nurses and dental technicians who are members of the Voluntary National Registers for their professions will be eligible to join the PCD register and maxillofacial prosthodontists and technologists who are full members of the Institute of Maxillofacial Prosthodontics and Technology will also be eligible to join.

Once registered, PCDs will be able to practise dentistry to the extent taught during their training and any treatment carried out by a PCD must be prescribed by a dentist who has examined the patient. However, all PCDs will be responsible to the GDC for practising within the limits of their competence.

Cost and training

The GDC will be charging PCDs an annual retention fee in order to remain on the register and to be allowed to keep practising, though as yet it has not decided what the fee will be. It also states that keeping skills and knowledge up-to-date is an integral part of professional accountability and plans to introduce a compulsory minimum number of hours of continual professional development (CPD) for PCDs, but the details of this have yet to be established.

There is also a committee which make decisions on dental professionals' fitness to practise. The Fitness to Practise panel is drawn from an independent pool of dental professionals and lay people. When it receives a complaint about someone on its registers, the GDC investigates complaints about the professional conduct or fitness to practise of dentists or PCDs and has the power to remove or restrict a registrant's right to practise if it is in the public interest.

Once PCDs have registered, the GDC intends to issue guidance to registrants on their roles and responsibilities, which it will expect PCDs to abide by. Registrants will then be responsible to the GDC for practising within the limits of their competence, and dentists, as leaders of the dental team, will be responsible to the GDC for ensuring that members of the dental team are not asked to undertake tasks that go beyond their training and skills.

The GDC does not know when in 2004 the register will open as new legislation is needed to make this possible. It intends to publicise when PCDs can apply for entry to the PCD register as soon as it is finalised and will contact all registered dentists and professional associations to let them know.

Statutory registration will not yet extend

to practice managers and receptionists as the GDC's efforts have been concentrated upon registering categories of PCD who have a clinical involvement with patients. Although there are currently no plans to register practice managers and receptionists this is something that the GDC may consider again once the PCD register opens.

Information on PCD registration is available on the GDC website at www.gdc-uk.org which has full details about qualifications, curricula requirements for qualifications and experience needed for entry onto the register. The GDC is also holding 'PCD Roadshows' around the country from now until Spring 2004. More information about these is also on the GDC website – and all members of the dental team are encouraged to attend.

WHAT IS A PCD?

PCD stands for Professionals Complementary to Dentistry, and includes all dental team members:

- ◆ Dental nurses including orthodontic nurses
- ◆ Dental hygienists
- ◆ Dental technicians including clinical and orthodontic technicians
- ◆ Dental therapists including orthodontic therapists
- ◆ Practice Managers
- ◆ Receptionists
- ◆ Maxillofacial Prosthetists and Technologists

Not all PCDs will be required to register with the GDC. See main article for details.

Qualifications needed to register with the GDC

Dental Nurse: Either the NVQ/SVQ Level 3 in Oral Healthcare or the National Certificate in Dental Nursing or Certificate of Proficiency in Dental Nursing awarded by a dental hospital which is recognised by the association of Dental Hospitals.

Clinical Dental Technician: No qualification currently exists in the UK. Qualifications for Clinical Dental Technicians have yet to be considered and approved by the Council.

Dental Technician: BTEC National Diploma in Dental Technology, SQA higher National Certificate in Dental Technology, Degree in Dental Technology awarded by Manchester Metropolitan University or the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff.

Orthodontic Therapist: No qualification currently exists in the UK. Qualifications for Orthodontic Therapists have yet to be considered and approved by the Council.

Maxillofacial Prosthetist and Technologist: Need to be qualified with one of the following in order to register: HNC/D including four maxillofacial options IMPT Qualifying Examination, Diploma in Professional Studies (Maxillofacial) – Hospital based, BSc (Hons) Dental Technology including two year MPT modules or Diploma in Professional Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Dental Hygienist: One from the following list of qualifications, Diploma in Dental Hygiene or combined Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy (awarded by the School of Dental Hygiene/Hygiene and Therapy or the Royal College of Surgeons)

Dental Therapist: Qualifications currently approved for enrolment are the Diploma in Dental Therapy or combined Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy (awarded by Schools of Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy).

Other qualifications which are no longer awarded will also make you eligible for registration.

Overseas PCDs: The GDC will establish arrangements for PCDs with European qualifications to apply for registration and set up a system of competency tests for those trained outside Europe.