The Team Approach to Handling Complaints

**Aim:** To provide an understanding of using a team approach to reduce the risk of complaints and to manage complaints should they arise.

**Learning outcomes:** On completion of this verifiable CPD article the participant will be able to demonstrate, through completion of a questionnaire, the ability to:

- Identify the meaning of a complaint.
- Identify the professional responsibility of the dental nurse in handling complaints.
- Identify some key aspects of a complaints procedure.
- Identify where to send patients for help and advice regarding NHS and private complaints if a satisfactory solution cannot be reached within the dental practice.

**Introduction**

The majority of patients are satisfied with the treatment they receive from their dentist or dental care professional. However, sometimes things can go wrong which may give rise to patient dissatisfaction and the potential for a complaint to be made. A complaint can be defined as “any expression of dissatisfaction by a patient (or their representative) whether justified or not.”

The role of the dental nurse is changing and evolving, resulting in an increased contribution within the dental team. This is likely to have an increasing impact on the care the patient receives. With increased responsibility comes the potential risk of a direct complaint from the patient. It is therefore important that the dental nurse is aware of the professional regulations regarding the handling of complaints, should one arise.

This article will give an overview of who and what patients may complain about, how complaints should be dealt with, and what measures can be taken to reduce the risk of complaint.

**Who do patients complain about?**

The Dental Complaints service was set up by the General Dental Council in 2006 to deal with complaints from patients who have complained to their dental practice but have been unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion to a complaint. The Dental Complaints Service produces an annual report of the complaints that were dealt with.
The annual report of 2009-2010 showed the number of complaints received against dental professionals were as follows:

- 1 Dental Nurse
- 1 Dental Therapist
- 8 Orthodontic Therapists
- 10 Hygienists
- 10 Clinical Dental Technicians
- + 1,136 Dentists

Although the number of dental nurses that received a direct complaint was low in the 2009-2010 annual report, the number of complaints against dental nurses is reported to be rising. The GDC stipulate that it is a professional responsibility of all registered dental professionals, to deal properly and professionally with complaints.

**What do patients complain about?**

Patients may complain about any aspect of their care. Societal and technological changes could be considered to have increased the capacity for patients to access information, and patients may wish to take a more active role in treatment planning. As such, it could be considered that patients have increasing expectations as to what they expect from a dental service. Complaints can arise when the treatment and service provided does not meet the patient’s expectations. This can be due to a failure to communicate.

The table below outlines the complaints that were received from The Dental Complaints Service in their 2009-2010 report. The Faculty of General Dental Practice express the importance of two way communication between the dental professional and the patient. It could be considered that the complaints highlighted in blue may have been avoided if there was good communication between the dental professional and the patient.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complaint</th>
<th>Number of complaints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failure of treatment</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General rudeness</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain-post operative</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate treatment</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain ignored</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability for treatment</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninformed</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcharged</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing care</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent not given</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too expensive</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain-operative</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal to treat</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired form of care not available on the NHS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment taken inappropriately</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient not informed of treatment</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent with treatment plan</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment plan not followed</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How can the risk of complaints be reduced?**

1) **Ensure that there is good communication between the patient and members of the dental team.**

Establishing good communication requires building rapport with the patient. This involves:

i) Listening to the patient. If you are involved in communicating information to the patient, remember the Acronym S.O.L.E.R.

   - Sit **S**quarely to the patient
   - maintain an **O**pen position
   - **L**ean towards the patient
   - maintain **E**ye contact
   - **R**elax

ii) Listening to the tone of voice.

iii) Watching and mirroring body language. 8,9

iv) Communicating in a way the patient can understand, taking into account their learning styles and any disabilities.

2) **Ensure the patient has understood the message and given consent for their treatment plan.**

The GDC10 outline the main ethical principles of gaining consent for treatment as:

- **Informed consent**- the patient needs to be given enough information to make a decision.
- **Voluntary decision making**- the patient has made the decision.
- **Ability**- the patient has the ability to make an informed decision.
The dental professional must ensure that the information regarding treatment is given in a way that is clearly understood by the patient to minimise misunderstandings. (Further information regarding gaining consent for treatment can be found in the GDC publication 'Principles of Consent' from the non-verifiable section of the website.)

3) **Ensure that you are trained and competent**

Dental nurses are able to develop additional skills throughout their careers. As a dental care professional, it is important to ensure you are working within your knowledge, professional competence and physical abilities.

4) **Invite feedback**

A review of 100 recent complaints received from an international indemnity provider, showed that in more than 40% of cases, a patient referred to a previous unsatisfactory experience prior to the incident that finally caused them to complain.

Inviting feedback from the patient will give the opportunity for the team to review their performance and improve the quality of care that can be given to patients, thus reducing the risk of complaints.

Feedback can be achieved through:

- Comment cards.
- Surveys.
- Asking the patient if they are happy.
- Follow up post-operative phone calls.

The aim is to encourage the patient to let the dental team know if there is a problem. This will enable the dental team to review their performance, before the patient begins to feel any slight dissatisfaction which could then result in a complaint.

**CQC and complaints handling**

To comply with CQC outcome 7 – Complaints, the dental team need to demonstrate:

- An appropriate and effective complaints procedure must be in place, which takes into account the GDC guidance and, where appropriate, the NHS complaints Regulations and the Ombudsman’s Principles.
- How the complaints procedure is brought to the attention of patients.
- How patients can obtain support and assistance in bringing a complaint.
- That their team is appropriately trained in complaints handling.
- That the practice learns from complaints.
The process for handling complaints

Patients should know who to contact if they have a problem and everyone in the dental team should be familiar with the complaints procedure. The GDC\(^2\) state that the complaints procedure:

- Is somewhere patients can see it.
- Is easy for patients to use.
- Allows you to deal with complaints quickly.
- Allows you to investigate complaints in a full and fair way.
- Respects patient’s confidentiality.
- Is clearly written without complicated language.
- Provides clearly explained outcomes for the patient.
- Passes information to improve service back to your practice management.

If a patient wishes to complain:

- ✓ Give the patient a copy of the complaints procedure.
- ✓ Let your defence union know if appropriate. Dental nurses who rely on their employer’s indemnity arrangements are responsible for checking and ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place to provide indemnity against clinical negligence claims brought against them by patients.\(^3\)
- ✓ If complaints cannot be sorted out immediately, you should normally send an acknowledgement of the complaint within 3 working days of receiving the complaint and respond to the complaint no later than 10 working days after receiving it.
- ✓ If time is required to investigate the complaint the time scales should be given to the patient.\(^2\)

When dealing with complaints, it is important not to be defensive but to deal with the situation practically. If, after attempting to come to a solution, the patient is still not happy, the patient can be informed about the NHS complaints procedures (or the Dental Complaints Service for private patients).

Learning from complaints

Research has shown that where a complaint is handled well, the loyalty of the patient may actually be strengthened.\(^4\) If a complaint occurs, lessons should be learnt from it to avoid the same situation happening again.

For future risk management consider:

- Why did the complaint arise?
- How could the complaint have been avoided?
- Was the complaint handled well?
- Did the practice and patient reach a satisfactory outcome?
Conclusion

The majority of patients are happy with the treatment they receive from their dental practice. However, complaints may sometimes arise when the patients expectations of what they expect from a dental service are not met. Dental nurses are taking on increasing roles and responsibilities and could be considered to be at increasing risk of having a direct complaint made against them by a patient. The dental nurse needs to be aware of the complaints procedure so that they can advise patients who wish to make a complaint about any aspect of their care. Complaints need not have a negative outcome, and if handled correctly, may strengthen the loyalty of the patient to the dental practice.

Portfolio Tip

Take time to review your complaints procedure within your practice.

Further information regarding the handling of complaints, and an example of a complaints procedure, can be accessed from the non-verifiable section of the website. Don't forget to update your non-verifiable CPD log.

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References

3. The Dental Defence Union (2011) Available at: http://www.themdu.com/section_dental_professionals/topnav_advice_centre_1/hidden_Article.asp?articleID=1877&contentType=Advice+article&articleTitle=DDU+membership+for+nurses+explained (accessed 30th November 2011)