

## COMPLAINTS HANDLING

**Jo Hanswenzl, looks at how effective complaints handling can create positive opportunities for your business.**

I think it's fair to assume that most DCPs will have faced a complaint from a patient at some point in their career! Most of you are more than capable of resolving these issues, but disputes which are not so easily resolved can be both stressful and time-consuming. With the possibility of litigation always looming in complaints cases, not to mention the distraction from your day-to-day role, what can you do to avoid losing the trust of your patients and reaching a stalemate situation? Below are a few ideas which I have found useful for both dealing with complaints and finding the most suitable outcomes for both parties to ensure retention.

### **Communication**

You all know that excellent communication skills can help ensure complaints are resolved earlier. This is sometimes easier said than done so it's a good idea to have a complaints handling procedure clearly displayed at the practice, so patients know where they stand. Some practices find that a consultation room separate to the dental surgery provides a more relaxed environment to discuss potential treatment, options and solutions.

In my experience, the overwhelming majority of complaint cases are caused by some form of breakdown in communication. It might be that a patient has not fully understood the implications of a particular form of treatment, or has chosen to disregard, or not take responsibility for, some aspects of their oral health. It may be that, however well you may have explained a particular form of treatment, the patient's anxiety level while in the practice environment was such that they were not receptive to information.

With the right training, all DCPs can play a key role in sorting out problems before they become unmanageable. Some providers offer tailor-made training days, which are specific to your practice's needs and can incorporate modules focused on Dealing with Challenging Situations and Complaints Handling. These courses can also count towards verifiable CPD when undertaken in accordance with GDC requirements.

### **Next steps**

The useful method for handling complaints effectively is to put yourself in the customer's shoes. Looking at things from their perspective may help you produce a workable solution and ensure their loyalty in the future. Face-to-face communication is preferable when trying to ascertain a problem, but often complaints come on the telephone. In these instances it's crucial that you show you're prepared to listen; as people generally need to feel they can get things off their chests.

Once you fully understand what the complaint is about it's worth trying to genuinely sympathise with the caller, showing concern about the issues they're raising. Sometimes, when dealing with an angry caller our first tendency is to speak in monotones to try and calm them down. However, reacting with the same shock and concern that the patient is feeling can often help to appease them. You can show them how seriously you are taking the complaint by summarising the conversation back to them to indicate that you have really listened and appreciated their comments. Once all the information has been gathered, further discussion can explore how the complaint could be resolved. If you need to check anything, give the caller your name and a firm commitment of when you will get back to them. Through this communication process, it's usually possible to move forward and reach a solution that is acceptable to both parties.

### **Patient lawsuits**

In the few cases where an impasse is reached, patients in the private sector can turn to the Dental Complaints Service for assistance or ultimately seek to pursue formal legal action such as the bespoke scheme operated by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. Arbitration can be costly, but it is worth noting that in the very few cases that reach this level, some payment plan providers offer patients and member dentists a free clinical mediation service as well as providing impartial advice on contractual and legislative issues.

### **Customer Service**

Excellence in customer service can differentiate a practice from competitors and handling complaints is an integral part of this. A word-of-mouth recommendation carries much more impact than any advert or marketing initiative and is, of course, free. Patients who have had a complaint resolved sympathetically and quickly can become advocates of the practice.

Excellent customer care, especially when it comes to complaints, makes patients feel that they are valued and are receiving good value for money. This then allows practices to maintain fair prices as well as sell a wider range of services to patients. Interestingly, good customer care goes hand in hand with good clinical care. Patients with whom you build a strong rapport are more likely to accept oral health advice and be more motivated to look maintain oral health. They are more likely to attend regular appointments and more likely to ask questions about treatment proposed. This will then cut down on the risk that a patient has not fully understood their clinical condition and subsequently complain.

Patient complaints are part of professional life and managing them effectively is one of the challenges of running a high-quality, customer-focused business. In fact, I have found that complaints can actually help to improve services and procedures because they may highlight a weakness in existing arrangements. Most DCPs are very good at complaints handling on a day-to-day basis, but hopefully the tips above can help too.

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### **About the author**

#### **Jo Hanswenzl – Professional Services Operational Manager**

Jo's responsibilities span Denplan's Clinical Mediation Service, Goodwill Transfer Service, the Denplan Quality Programme and Denplan Training. She manages a team of 15 advisors and administrators, as well as working closely with a team of over 30 Practice Advisors who deliver the Denplan Quality Programme, online manual and advice to member dentists.