
PATIENT DIVERSITY – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Angela Chadwick looks at patient diversity and how practices can not only adhere to relevant laws and regulations on this topic, but actually attract new patients as a result.

The UK is one of the most culturally diverse countries on the planet, but diversity goes far beyond race and religion alone. The law states that everyone should be treated with the same level of respect and have equal access to services regardless of their age, sex, disability, sexual orientation, religion, beliefs or race – ensuring that your practice is fully compliant with this however, is easier said than done.

An ageing population

Government statistics show that for the first time there are more people over the age of 65 than under 18 and by 2033 23% of the population will be 65 and over¹. This shouldn't be seen as a burden however, as people in their 50's, 60's and 70's are far more likely to have disposable income for more complex cosmetic dentistry and can therefore be a very lucrative patient-base to attract.

And, if you're unsure about the age-range of your current patient base, some payment plan providers can arrange a free ACORN profiling service which can help you identify the age group of the population in your surrounding area, as well as other useful marketing information.

Stereotyping and discrimination

We're all influenced by the media, our friends, family and our own experiences and this can sometimes lead to misconceptions and the unconscious prejudicial treatment of others. For instance, it's not uncommon for blind people to have questions about their health directed to their seeing companion, or for people to assume that all people with disabilities use wheelchairs. Therefore, it's a good idea to analyse whether your team is unknowingly discriminating.

¹ www.statistics.gov.uk

If your patient has impaired sight, simple actions such as saying their name, so they know you're addressing them, can make all the difference and giving more information, so they understand what you're doing when you're not speaking. If your patient has a hearing impairment, remember to look straight at them and not cover your mouth. You could also consider allowing one of your team to become trained in sign language, but if you cannot cater for a patient's disability effectively, have one or two alternative practices they could be referred to.

Cultural Diversity

There are many potential difficulties when it comes to cultural diversity in practice and it's entirely possible that you'll have to communicate with patients who cannot speak English or fill in the appropriate forms as a result of language barriers. There are also other issues to take into account, such as religious beliefs, different customs and different body language gestures. So, what can you do to help?

You could consider promoting team members who speak different languages, or hiring someone to help if you live in an area with lots of people speaking a specific language. You could also ask patients if they need assistance in completing forms and check that they have understood your advice before they leave. If there's a significant language barrier, you could also suggest that patients bring someone with them who can help translate, so that the patient feels calm and relaxed.

Disabilities

Since October 2004 companies and organisations that provide services to the public are required by the Disabilities and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to make 'reasonable adjustments' to premises and procedures to aid fair access to services and premises. 'Reasonable adjustments' is a phrase used within the law to give some flexibility and allow different solutions in different situations.

The Disability Rights commission can give you detailed information about all the things you can do to ensure you're compliant with regulations as well as best-practice advice. Some payment plan providers can also offer tailor-made training days, which are specific to your practices



needs and can incorporate modules focused on Patient Diversity. Some of these courses can also count towards verifiable CPD when undertaken in accordance with GDC requirements.

Dealing with patient diversity in practice mainly requires patience, consideration and common sense. By catering for the needs of as many people as possible you're not only setting yourself apart from the competition in your area, but opening your practice up for growth long into the future.

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About the Author:

Angela Chadwick - Denplan Sales Trainer

Angela has over 20 years experience within dental practice management, working in both the NHS and private sector. Angela trained and coached receptionists and nurses throughout her time in practice to understand and perform their roles and responsibilities within the team. This broad range of practice management experience gives her an excellent base of knowledge and skills to support practices within Denplan Training.