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# PRINCIPLES OF COMPLAINTS HANDLING



GENERAL DENTAL COUNCIL  
**STANDARDS GUIDANCE**

GDC | protecting patients,  
regulating the dental team

**“ We aim to** protect patients  
promote confidence in dental  
professionals  
be at the forefront of healthcare  
regulation

**We** register qualified professionals  
set standards of dental practice and  
conduct  
assure the quality of dental education  
ensure professionals keep  
up-to-date  
help patients with complaints about a  
dental professional  
work to strengthen patient  
protection”

## ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Our standards guidance, 'Standards for dental professionals' sets out six main principles which you should follow in all areas of your work as a dental professional.

The guidance says:

### **'Put patients' interests first and act to protect them.'**

- Give patients who make a complaint about the care or treatment they have received a helpful response at the appropriate time. Respect the patient's right to complain. Make sure that there is an effective complaints procedure where you work and follow it at all times. Co-operate with any formal inquiry into the treatment of a patient.

This guidance provides a checklist for handling complaints in line with the principles set out in 'Standards for dental professionals'. A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction by a patient (or their representative) about a dental service or treatment whether justified or not.

**1 Respecting the patient's right to complain**

- 1.1** It is part of your responsibility as a dental professional to deal properly and professionally with complaints.
- 1.2** If you get a complaint from a patient, deal with it calmly and in line with your complaints procedure.
- 1.3** Aim to sort out the complaint as quickly, effectively and smoothly as possible.
- 1.4** Keep a written log of complaints so that you can use this to monitor your performance in handling complaints and identify possible areas for improvement.

## 2 Checklist

**2.1** Make sure you have a procedure for handling complaints and that it recognises the following.

- A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction by a patient (or their representative) about a dental service or treatment, whether justified or not.
- Complaints can be spoken or written and can be about any part of the service you provide.
- Many complaints will not be about your technical skills or the quality of the clinical care you give to patients. Patients complain because their expectations of a good level of service have not been met. If a patient's expectation does not match yours, this can often be the result of a failure to communicate.

- If you handle a complaint well, it will make sure that you maintain and improve your relationship with the patient.
- Speed is a top priority when handling complaints. The longer you leave the complaint without sorting it out, the more irritated patients may get.

**2.2** Make sure your 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 confidentiality;
- is clearly written without complicated language;
- provides clearly explained outcomes for the patient; and
- passes information to improve service back to your practice management.

### **3 Setting the framework**

- 3.1** Let patients know who to contact if they have a problem with the service you have provided, or the service your practice provides.
- 3.2** Make sure everyone who works in the practice is familiar with the complaints procedure. If you are an employer or manage a team, provide training in how to deal with patients' concerns and complaints and how to apologise and offer practical solutions.

## **4 The process for handling complaints**

- 4.1** Give your patient a copy of your complaints procedure when you acknowledge their complaint.
- 4.2** Let your dental defence organisation know, if appropriate, when you receive a complaint so that they can help you to sort it out effectively.
- 4.3** Make sure the information you give to patients about your procedures for handling complaints includes a description of the timescales and stages involved.
- 4.4** You should normally respond to a complaint in writing or by phone as soon as you receive it, if possible. If you cannot sort the complaint out immediately, you should normally send an acknowledgement within 3 working days of receiving the complaint and respond to the complaint no later than 10 working days after receiving it. However, this may be different if there are exceptional circumstances or if you have agreed a different timescale with the patient.
- 4.5** If you need time to investigate a complaint, tell your patient in your acknowledgement when they will hear from you.
- 4.6** If there are exceptional circumstances, regularly update your patient with the progress of the investigation (at least every 10 working days).



## **5 Dealing with the complaint**

- 5.1** Do not be defensive when dealing with complaints.
- 5.2** Make sure you deal with all the points raised in a complaint and offer a suitable solution for each one at the same time.
- 5.3** Offer an apology and a practical solution where appropriate. Remember that an apology does not mean you are admitting responsibility. Apologise that something has gone wrong, as a way of showing concern and understanding.
- 5.4** If the patient's complaint is justified, offer a fair solution, which may include offering to put things right at your own expense if you have made a mistake.
- 5.5** At the end of your investigation, send your patient a letter explaining:
- what you have decided; and
  - any practical solutions you are prepared to offer.
- 5.6** If, despite your efforts to sort the matter out, the patient is still not satisfied, tell them about any NHS complaints procedures (or the Dental Complaints Service for private patients).

## **6 Learning from complaints**

- 6.1** Analyse any complaints so that you can improve your services as a result.

## **7 Summary**

- 7.1** Complaints arise when people don't get the service they expect. Patients often complain about service issues, such as lack of politeness or poor communication, as well as clinical issues.
- 7.2** Don't treat every complaint as a possible negligence case but do discuss a complaint with your dental defence organisation as soon as possible after you receive it.
- 7.3** Your complaints procedure is part of your approach to patient care. Make sure everyone (dental professionals, staff and patients) knows about it.
- 7.4** A good complaints procedure is simple. Don't make it more complicated than it has to be.
- 7.5** Complaints are often urgent. Deal with them quickly before they have time to grow.
- 7.6** Handling complaints well involves being polite and showing consideration. Listen carefully to patients and involve them fully in the process of sorting their complaint out.
- 7.7** Above all, say and show how sorry you are that something has gone wrong.

## GUIDANCE THAT SUPPORTS THIS BOOKLET

As well as this booklet, we have produced guidance booklets on the following.

- Standards for Dental Professionals (published May 2005)
- Principles of Patient Confidentiality (published May 2005)
- Principles of Patient Consent (published May 2005)
- Principles of Dental Team Working (published January 2006)
- Principles of Raising Concerns (published May 2006)

You can download these booklets, and more copies of this booklet, from our website, or you can phone or e-mail us for copies using the contact details below.

### Other sources of advice

You can find a range of further sources of information and advice for dental professionals and the public on our website at **[www.gdc-uk.org](http://www.gdc-uk.org)** Or, you can phone us for a copy of the list on **020 7887 3800** or email us at [standards@gdc-uk.org](mailto:standards@gdc-uk.org)

## CONTACT US

To check whether somebody is a registered dentist or registered dental care professional, or on the Specialist Lists: [registration@gdc-uk.org](mailto:registration@gdc-uk.org)  
Or check online at [www.gdc-uk.org](http://www.gdc-uk.org)

For more information about how we quality-assure dental education: [qualityassurance@gdc-uk.org](mailto:qualityassurance@gdc-uk.org)

For more information on making a complaint about a dental professional: [complaints@gdc-uk.org](mailto:complaints@gdc-uk.org)

To find out more about our standards of practice and behaviour: [standards@gdc-uk.org](mailto:standards@gdc-uk.org)

To find out more about how we're working to improve patient protection through our modernisation programme: [communications@gdc-uk.org](mailto:communications@gdc-uk.org)

If you would like a large print or audio version of this leaflet, please contact [communications@gdc-uk.org](mailto:communications@gdc-uk.org)

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