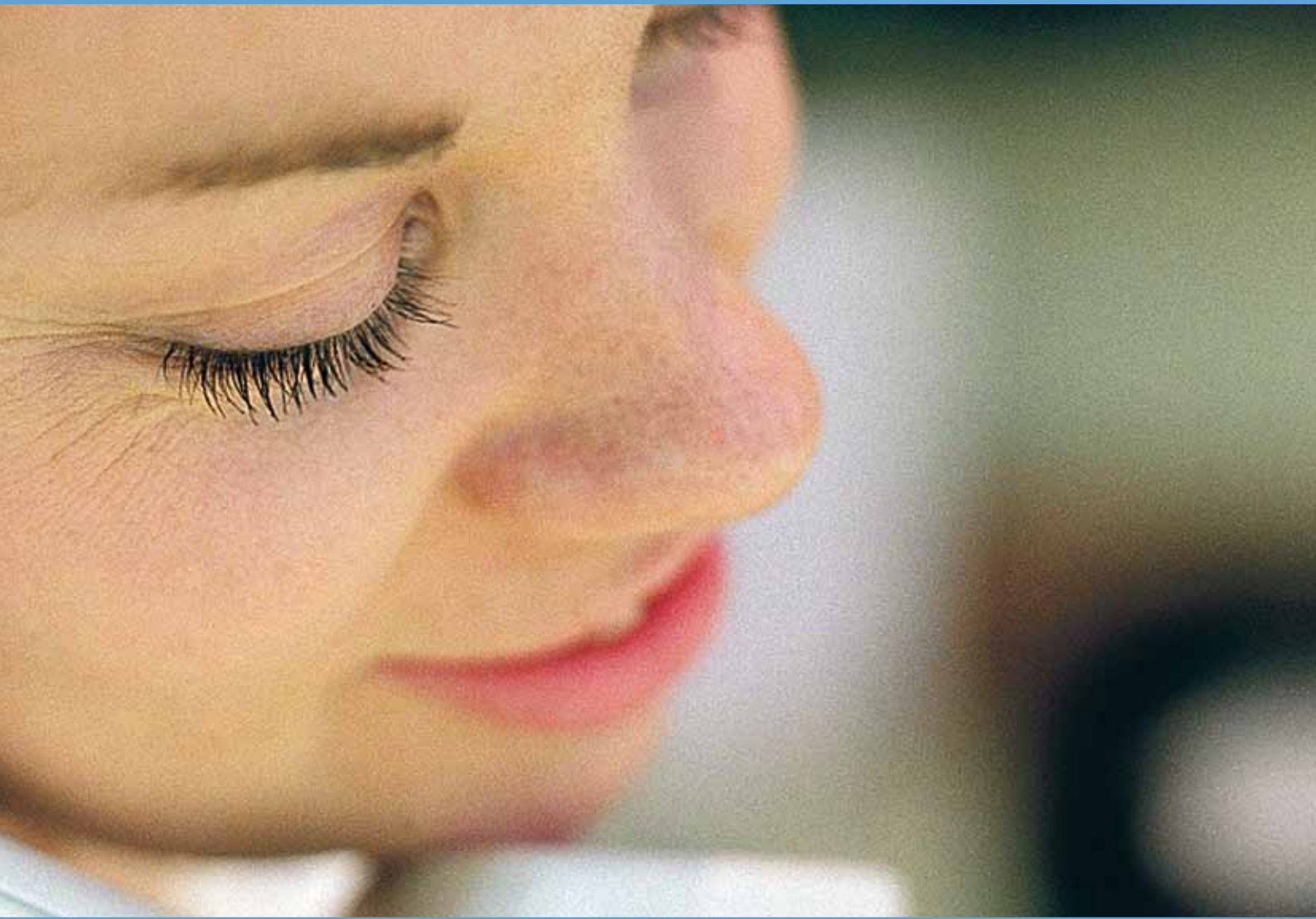


Complaint handling

Dental
Protection



Training

Identifying complaints

Accepting complaints

Obtaining the views of all the parties involved

Investigating fully

Resolving the dissatisfaction

Responding sympathetically

Following-up

Learning from the problem

Communicating

Ten key steps to ensure you make the best of an unwanted situation

Most claims and disciplinary inquiries start their life as a simple complaint. Whilst these can be hurtful and demoralising we should not lose sight of the opportunities that complaints can also represent:

- Issues can be addressed before other parties become involved: e.g. lawyers or a regulatory body.
- Improving the quality of service from the dental team where complaints identify areas requiring improvement either clinically or in standards of service delivery.
- A stronger relationship can subsequently be rebuilt with the patient.

Research shows that where a service delivery complaint is handled well, then the loyalty of that patient is often strengthened. Where the complaint concerns a major shortcoming on the part of the dental team, then effective handling of a complaint can minimise the inevitable damage. The key to complaints handling is a flexibility of

approach. The complaints process must adapt to the needs of a patient and not the other way round!

Although there is no one single way to handle a complaint there are 10 key steps that should always be considered.

Step 1 Training

Good communicators usually make good complaints handlers. Most members of the dental team have no formal training in communication, or complaints handling, so it is worthwhile training them in these skills.

Consider your own reaction in this situation. If you were the 'unhappy' patient asking the practice receptionist for the name of a person dealing with complaints and the answer comes back 'I'm not really sure, could you call back tomorrow when the other receptionist is here?' Would you feel more confident about the practice and its ability to handle a complaint? Are you likely to take the complaint further?

Risk management tip

It is important to train all those in the dental team who might be involved with the complaints handling process. Untrained staff should then be instructed to direct all complaints speedily to the nearest trained complaints handler.

Step 2 Identifying complaints

Consider a proactive approach to identifying complaints. The majority of dissatisfied patients do not complain at all. They simply leave and go elsewhere, which is not good for business. There are many ways of identifying dissatisfaction.



- Comment cards – usually only completed by patients who are particularly displeased or delighted with service.
- Surveys – not all patients will respond.
- Train staff to identify the ‘body language’ associated with dissatisfaction.

The aim is to encourage patients to tell you if they have a problem, before they tell someone else! A review of 100 recent complaints received by an international indemnity provider, showed that in over 40% of cases the patient referred to a previous unsatisfactory experience prior to the incident which gave rise to the complaint.

Risk management tip

Early identification of the dissatisfied patient stops them accumulating a store of complaints.

Case study

A patient complained to a Dental Board about the attitude of a dentist and his nurse. In the letter they referred to a previous incident and a lack of cleanliness in the surgery. The Regulatory Body did not pursue the matter of the dentist’s attitude but carried out a full investigation of the dentist’s infection control techniques.

Step 3 Accepting complaints

The complaints handler needs to co-ordinate the acceptance, investigation and response to the complaint. They do not necessarily have to provide the detailed response themselves, however they have a responsibility to ensure that an appropriate team member is always available to respond.

All complaints should be acknowledged quickly, informing the patient when they might anticipate a formal response. When replying to complaints avoid over-promising and under-delivering. If, for example, the dentist involved will be away from the practice for a month, then inform the patient. A patient is more likely to react favourably if they know that their complaint has been accepted and is being dealt with.



Communication skills are an essential part of complaints handling

Step 4 Obtaining the views of all the parties involved

It is important for the complaints co-ordinator to identify all the parties involved in order to avoid confusion. Any attempt to generate an instant response on behalf of another person who may have left a practice or clinic should be resisted.

Risk management tip

Identify all parties involved and seek their views.

Co-ordinate the response so that the parties know their role in the complaints process.

Case study

A principal dentist received a complaint about one of his assistants who was away on leave. The complaint centred on the patient’s appointment being cancelled at short notice, which had left them with toothache over night.

The principal apologised and indicated that the appointment had been cancelled due to the illness of the assistant dental surgeon.

Unfortunately, this was not correct. The assistant spoke to the patient independently and said that the reason for the cancelled appointment was a lack of staff in the clinic. The patient was now confused and raised a further complaint. The assistant’s version of events turned out to be true, however, the principal had acted in haste without seeking the views of the others involved and in so doing had made the situation worse.

Step 5 Investigating fully

Perhaps the greatest error in complaints handling is to provide a detailed response before investigating and gathering the facts. It is important to remember that any response to a complaint could be read out at a later hearing. The response, following a full investigation, is likely to be more thorough and accurate and indeed fairer to all parties involved.

Step 6 Resolving the dissatisfaction

Understandably many people become defensive when they receive a complaint, particularly if they regard it as unreasonable, spurious or without foundation. Defensiveness can be counter productive to good complaints handling and at worst results in the dentist's response sounding more like a counterattack than an explanation.

When a complaint is received, it is important to consider for a moment the desired outcome, i.e. do you want to retain the patient, agree to differ or try to resolve the patient's dissatisfaction? Each choice demands a different response.

One common error that often results in a counterclaim is the enforcement of a debt when a patient has complained about the quality of treatment provided.

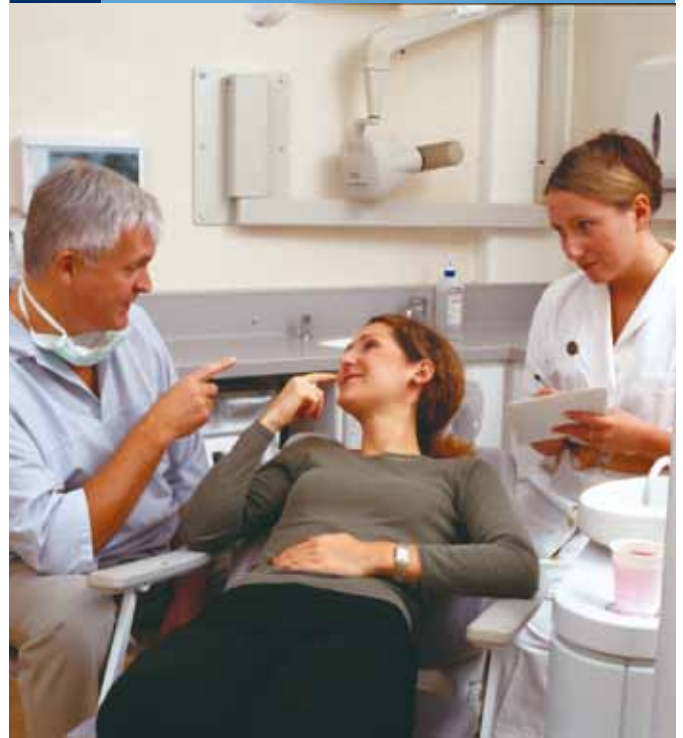
Case study

A dentist found herself before a disciplinary tribunal for issuing a summons against a patient for unpaid fees. The patient refused to pay the fee for six anterior crowns that the patient regarded as unsatisfactory in appearance.

The dentist maintained that there was no problem with the appearance and criticised the patient for changing her mind during the course of treatment. The dentist had cemented the crowns permanently and refused to deal with the patient's complaint until the fees were paid. Consequently the dentist was strongly reprimanded for the manner in which the complaint had been handled and the subsequent claim had to be settled for a small sum when an expert report suggested that whilst the appearance of the crowns was satisfactory, unfortunately the fit was not!

Risk management tip

Try to establish a method that encourages patient feedback about their perception of the service and the quality of care received.



Step 7 Responding sympathetically

Complaints are best resolved at the lowest possible level. This does not always imply a definitive written response. Many minor complaints can be resolved on a one-to-one basis. Subsequently a short letter can be sent to the patient saying that you are happy that the complaint is now resolved. This sympathetic contact can make a significant difference in terms of patient loyalty.

In the majority of cases, however, a written response is likely to be appropriate. This may include an explanation, reassurance, an apology, an offer of compromise or a way forward. It is important to decide in advance exactly what message you wish to convey in a letter. Not everyone is skilled at letter writing but always choose your words carefully. Remember that your response is likely to be looked at by others at some stage and therefore any temptation

to attack the patient should be avoided. The more reasonable and professional your written response the more credit you will be given at any subsequent hearing of the complaint.

Step 8 Following-up

The hardest part of complaints handling is risking further contact with the patient to ensure that the complaint is being satisfactorily resolved. This may not be appropriate in all cases, but it can be extremely helpful, particularly when you want to retain the confidence of the patient.

There is really no difference between this and a dentist contacting a patient after a difficult procedure to enquire about their wellbeing. Even if the patient is not completely satisfied, it provides a further opportunity to identify a complaint and deal with dissatisfaction at an early stage. It also demonstrates care and consideration.

Case study

A young dentist made a set of full dentures for an elderly patient. The patient thought they were unsatisfactory and wrote a strong letter of complaint demanding a refund. The dentist picked up the telephone to the patient and offered to see him. He adjusted the set of dentures and offered to remake the lower denture or to refer for a specialist opinion.

The patient opted for a remake of the lower denture, as he was satisfied with the upper.

The patient had an atrophic lower ridge and the remade lower denture was still uncomfortable. The patient did not return and so the dentist telephoned the patient to ask how he was getting on with the new denture. The patient said he was still unable to wear the denture.

The dentist offered a full refund, which the patient did not immediately accept. He received a nice letter from the patient a week later indicating that whilst he was unable to wear the denture, he did not wish to have a refund. He was grateful for the time and effort the dentist had spent trying to get a satisfactory result and also that the dentist had taken the time to follow-up the complaint.

Step 9 Learning from the problem

All complaints can teach us something.

For future risk management consider:

- How the complaint arose.
- What steps could have been taken to avoid the complaint in the first place?
- Was the complaint handled effectively?
- Did the practice/patient achieve the desired outcome?

It is important to remember that complaints alert you to areas of service delivery that, if not addressed, could lead to a more serious complaint in the future.

Step 10 Communicating

Complaints need to be handled with:

- Speed
- Fairness to all parties
- Transparency.

Risk management tip

A patient is more likely to accept the eventual outcome if they can see that a complaint has been taken seriously and has been investigated. This needs to be communicated to the patient. Although



research shows that patient's expectations in complaints handling are quite low, never delay your response to a complaint. This is the one thing that can transform a dissatisfied patient into an angry obsessive seeking vengeance from their dentist.

Every minute spent at the initial stages of handling a complaint can save an hour of stress, inconvenience and expense if the complaint is allowed to escalate or pass into formal complaints or disciplinary arenas



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DPL Publications

Dental Protection Limited
33, Cavendish Square, London, W1G 0PS, UK

T: +44 (0)20 7399 1400

F: +44 (0)20 7399 1401

enquiries@mps.org.uk

www.dentalprotection.org

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