

Customer Care and Complaints Handling

Customer Care

Excellent customer care skills are essential for a modern practice. It is impossible to define where good customer care ends and good clinical care starts. In this modern era the two are inseparable.

Evidence shows that:

- patients tend to take clinical skills for granted and judge their dentist on how they are treated as people
- happy patients tend to become healthy patients and want to stay that way with continuing care
- good customer care is the most cost-effective way to market a dental practice as satisfied patients spread the word
- excellent customer care makes patients feel that they are getting good value for money in a service profession like dentistry
- practices offering good customer care are able to maintain fair prices enabling them to thrive.

A number of studies carried out over the last 10-15 years have shown that patients want:

- their dental practices to look clean and staff to appear hygienic
- to be treated in a friendly, empathetic manner
- to be dealt with as people, not as 'a row of teeth'
- preventive oral care
- dental interventions only when necessary to improve their oral health.
- clear and transparent pricing of dental care.
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(Based on the work of Finch Keegan and Ward, Shipway Bailey and Nelson and DEMOS)

Measuring Customer Satisfaction - Patient Surveys

It has been said that you can only manage and improve something if you can measure it. We cannot assume that our patients are appreciating our efforts.

Confidential patient satisfaction surveys carried out by an independent body are considered the gold standard. There is a suggestion that patients will be more honest with their feedback to an independent body.

Denplan Excel Accredited dentists have an extensive survey carried out for them by an independent organisation every two years. Their own results are issued to them confidentially. Each member also sees a national reference sample of other practices' results for comparison. The most important measurement is comparing your own results over time however. An extensive survey will always reveal areas where customer care can be improved. What is perceived as excellent care today will be regarded as common-place in a couple of years. We therefore must continue to measure our patient perceptions and form action plans to deal with weaker areas

Information for Patients

'Good Practice' ensures that patients are well informed. Suitable information leaflets could include:

- Preventive care and oral hygiene
- Dental health education materials
- Dietary advice sheets
- Post extraction or surgical instructions
- Treatment information
- Welcome pack for new patients including Practice Information Leaflet
- Practice fee rate guide
- Statement of practice philosophy and aims

Complaints Handling

Compliments, comments and complaints are a valuable source of feedback reflecting patients' views and feelings about the service and care you and your team provide.

Whilst complaints are seldom welcomed, responding to complaints promptly personally, and efficiently is good professional and commercial practice and reduces the likelihood of more serious action at a later stage.

Patients may not always use the word "complaint" - they may offer a "comment" or "suggestion". It is important to recognise those comments or suggestions which are really complaints and know how to handle them.

Patients are becoming increasingly consumer driven. They know their rights and how they want to be treated. They expect full explanations of the need for treatment and all alternatives available. They also expect to receive value for money.

Excellent communication is the key to keeping patients happy and problems are nearly always due to a breakdown in communication. Dealing with problems as they arise, before resulting in a complaint, may avoid the need to carry out a full complaint investigation. All complaints/comments should be taken seriously.

The whole practice team should understand how the procedure works, but one person is nominated specifically to administer the procedure.

Records need to be kept of complaints, investigations and outcomes; these should be kept separate from clinical records.

Why patients complain

Patients can feel dissatisfied for many different reasons but the motivation to actually register a complaint in writing, on the telephone or in person is usually one of the following:

- To let off steam and be heard.
- To receive an apology (which is not the same as an admission of liability and should be given at the earliest opportunity).
- To hear an explanation.
- To have reassurance that remedial action has been taken so that the same problem won't arise again.
- To receive redress/recompense (sometimes financial compensation).

Responding to complaints

When patients complain they want to be listened to and taken seriously. Therefore when a patient complains it is advisable to:

- Listen effectively.
- Determine exactly what the patient is trying to achieve in complaining.
- Offer sympathy and apologise.
- Agree a course of action.
- Make sure you carry out what you agree.
- Follow up by checking that your patient is now satisfied.
- Pro-actively review complaints system.
- Investigate all possible solutions.
- Never be defensive or attempt to justify yourself or your actions.

Establishing a complaints procedure

Involve the team:

- Ask your practice team for input into any proposed changes to your complaints handling procedure.
- If possible appoint a specific complaints co-ordinator.
- Try to arrange relevant training for the whole team.
- Document the procedure that you agree upon, possibly in the form of a flowchart, and make it accessible for everyone to view.

Set timescales and targets:

- Set deadlines for responding at each stage of the complaints process.
- Ideally, the complaint should be acknowledged within two working days, confirming how it will be dealt with and anticipated timescales.
- Aim to provide a full response within ten working days.
- If delays are unavoidable, the patient should be notified of the revised timetable.

Approach:

- If the matter is a minor one, give the patient a straightforward response and confirm in writing.
- Arrange a meeting with the patient if a face-to-face discussion will be beneficial.
- If a clinical matter is involved, consider seeking advice from your defence organisation before responding.
- Potentially serious matters should always be referred to your defence organisation, although more general advice can also be sought from Denplan's Complaint Handling and Risk Management department.

Records:

- Keep full records of complaints in a central file.
- Include all dates, details of any investigation, notes of meetings and telephone conversations, copies of correspondence and details of the outcome.
- Review the file regularly to check for recurring themes and possible suggestions for improvements.

Inform:

Use a waiting room poster and your practice information literature to tell your patients about your complaints procedure and how they can use it.

If your patient remains dissatisfied or is unwilling to participate, record the facts and refer the patient to: NHS patients – your local primary care trust or health authority. Denplan patients – Private Patients – Dental Complaints Service, the independent service funded by the GDC.

Dental Complaints Service

This impartial service has been set up to help resolve complaints about private dental care as fairly and as quickly as possible. The service covers the whole of the UK and is available to any patient wishing to complain about any aspect of dental care, treatment or service involving any member of a dental team.

How it works

- Dissatisfied patients who call the service will be first be encouraged to use the dental practice's own complaints procedures, if they have not already done so.
- If the complaint remains unresolved a Dental Complaints Service adviser will discuss the complaint directly with the patient and the dental professional concerned.
- If the adviser cannot resolve the matter, the complaint will go to a regional panel consisting of two lay volunteers and one dental professional volunteer. The panel will meet with the dental professional and the patient and recommend how best to resolve the complaint. Their emphasis will be on resolving complaints using common sense.

Serious complaints – which raise issues about patient safety and whether a practitioner should continue practising – continue to be dealt with by the GDC.

Further Information

Denplan's Complaint Handling Team Tel: 0800 169 7220

BDA Advice Sheet B10 'Handling Complaints'. B11' Handling Private Practice Complaints'. <http://www.bda.org> Tel no: 0207 935 0875

NHS Executive's Guidance Pack "Complaints: Listening, Acting, Improving"

Dental Complaints Service. Tel no: 08456 120 540
www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk

GDC Standards Guidance "Principles of Complaints Handling" www.gdc-uk.org

Information for Patients The Village Dental Centre

If you have a complaint or concern about the service you have received from the dentists or any of the staff working in this practice, please let us know. We operate a practice complaints procedure. Our complaint system adheres to national criteria.

How to Complain

We hope that most problems can be sorted out easily and quickly, at the time they arise and with the person concerned. If your problem cannot be sorted in this way and you wish to make a complaint, we would like you to let us know as soon as possible – ideally, within a matter of days or at most a few weeks – because this will enable us to establish what happened most easily. If it is not possible to do that, please let us have details of your complaint:

- within 6 months of the incident that caused the problem; or
- within 6 months of discovering that you have a problem, provided this is within 12 months of the incident.

Complaints about the treatment you received should be made to the dentist who normally sees you. Alternatively, you may ask for an appointment for < > in order to discuss your concerns. He/She will explain the complaints procedure to you and will ensure that your concerns are dealt with promptly. It will help if you are as clear as possible about your complaint.

What We Shall Do

We shall acknowledge your complaint within 2 working days and aim to have looked into your complaint within 10 working days of the date when you raised it with us. We shall then be in a position to give you an explanation, or offer a meeting with those involved.

In investigating your complaint, we shall aim to:

- find out what happened and what went wrong
- enable you to discuss the problem with those concerned, if you would like this;
- ensure you receive an apology, where this is appropriate;
- identify what we can do to make sure the problem does not happen again.

Complaining on Behalf of Someone Else

Please note that we keep strictly to the rules of confidentiality. If you are complaining on behalf of someone else, we have to know that you have the permission to do so. A note signed by the person concerned will be needed,

unless that are incapable of providing this because of physical or mental illness or are a child under 16 years.

Complaining to Dental Complaints Service

We hope that, if you have a problem, you will make use of our practice complaints procedure. We believe this will provide the best chance of putting right whatever has gone wrong and an opportunity to improve our practice. However this does not affect your right to complain to the Dental Complaints Service, if you feel you cannot raise your complaint with us or you are dissatisfied with the result of our investigation. If you wish further advice you should contact:

Dental Complaints Service
The Lansdowne Building
2 Lansdowne Road
Croyden
CR9 2ER
Tel. 08456 120 540

E-mail: info@dentalcomplaints.org.uk

You may also like to contact The General Dental Council for more advice

The General Dental Council
37 Wimpole Street
London
W1M 8DQ
Tel. 020 7887 3800

E-mail: Complaints@gdc-uk.org

For those patients who have a complaint regarding treatment they have received under the NHS can also contact the Primary Care NHS Trust/HB – their contact details are as follow:

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For those patients registered with this practice with Denplan can contact Denplan by telephone for advice:

Denplan
Tel. 0800 169 7220