



Proactive approaches to complaint management

Jennie Jones explores complaint handling and how to prevent escalations in the dental practice setting

Responding and resolving primary healthcare complaints requires a combination of compassion, effective dispute resolution skills and a person-centred process. For those members of the practice team who fulfil this role, that compassion and resolution expertise often extends to colleagues as well as patients.

Healthcare complaints are more emotive than consumer-to-business complaints, and the emotional drivers exist for both healthcare professionals and their patients. Dental patient complaints also involve the interaction between the NHS and private funding of dental treatment, which brings an additional element in sectors like dentistry and optical healthcare.

Communication and timely interactions sit at the heart of defusing issues and avoiding escalation.

The most complex complaints can often be triggered by lower level issues that escalate to major problems, harming the practice's reputation and team cohesion in the process. Research also illustrates the negative impact this has on healthcare professionals' approach to care, where being complained about results in defensive practice, in turn hampering patient interaction, trust and confidence further.

Adopting proactive approaches to communication and complaint management is key to preventing escalation, and also

building continuous improvement into the practice culture, which improves retention and staff wellbeing. In this article we look to explore some of the strategies that can help theory to be embedded into practice.

EMPOWERING STAFF

The first step in proactive complaint management is maintaining a culture where patients are able to ask questions or voice any concerns easily. Alongside this should sit a confident and compassionate team who receive those queries or concerns as an opportunity to support and assist patients.

Team members who interact with patients at all touchpoints need to feel confident about having open conversations around complaints or dissatisfaction.

Practical, focused training on communication and complaint handling builds confidence and encourages staff to manage situations 'in the moment'. This training should cover active listening, empathy and problem-solving skills.

Empowering colleagues to resolve low-level issues at the first point of contact builds confidence and creates a sense of ownership.

Often, this early dialogue helps manage issues as part of the 'everyday' patient interaction whenever possible. Doing this reduces the need for escalations and can lead to faster resolutions, enhancing customer satisfaction in the process.

Regular scenario and insight-led training sessions and updates on company policies and procedures can keep the team prepared to handle complaints proactively and consistently. Even in a busy practice without full team cover, we can see the time, energy and cost savings of earlier conversations and resisting the auto-pilot response of 'email the practice manager'.

ESTABLISH CLEAR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

A clear complaint policy that encourages early resolution can establish a sturdy framework and bring clarity – but it must also encompass a human and compassionate response.

Where complaints need to enter a more formal process, clear communication channels must be established and communicated to patients. This can be done through various touchpoints, including websites and in practice, but regardless of whether it's a dedicated helpline, online form, or a customer service email, accessibility and responsiveness are crucial.

Prompt acknowledgment of complaints can reassure patients that their concerns are being taken seriously.

When patients know how to raise and communicate concerns, this helps the complaint stay focused on the complaint issues rather than having it erupt in a more public channel when patients feel dismissed or without a voice.

Making feedback channels readily available, and sharing complaint and feedback procedures, encourages patients to share both positive and negative feedback, as well as managing the escalation from informal dialogue to formal complaint process.

Having a transparent complaint resolution policy that is easily accessible to patients can set clear expectations and reduce frustration. This policy should outline how complaints are handled, the steps involved, and the expected timeframes for resolution.

Transparency can build trust and demonstrate a commitment to addressing customer concerns effectively.

Jennie Jones



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FOSTER A PATIENT-CENTRIC CULTURE

Cultivating a person-centric culture within the practice can significantly impact how complaints are handled.

When all team members understand the importance of patient satisfaction, put people over process and are encouraged to prioritise it, they are more likely to take proactive steps to address issues. The most effective practice teams work as 'one': their different skill sets and strengths complement each other, creating a positive culture for patients.

There are multiple benefits in managing complaints from a 'customer' perspective – the 'NHS Friends and Family' test is a simple concept that helps to remind us all to stand in the patient's shoes.

We live and breathe our professional shorthand. We sit more comfortably in our practice environments. We have the reassurance of our knowledge and clinical experience. Understanding an interaction from the client's perspective helps to identify the 'why'.

RESOLUTION THROUGH MEDIATION

There are a number of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) approaches. Mediation is

one of these, which has been found to be effective in healthcare complaints.

Mediation seeks to understand the circumstances of the complaint and to then gain a deeper understanding of the root cause, the drivers and the barriers to resolution to help the parties to find a mutually agreeable way forward.

This empathetic approach encourages healthcare professionals to listen, ask and watch and avoid assumptions, jumping to solutions that may unintentionally inflame the situation. As Stephen Covey points out most people listen to respond, very few listen to understand!

Active and engaged listening is a fundamental ingredient in a customer-centric culture, and a key part of mediation techniques.

Using open questions to explore the complaint and the wide context of the patient's concerns, and then summarising your understanding help to gain a greater understanding of what is going on beneath the surface of the complaint – particularly where the practice feels the complaint is unjustified or the patient's reaction is disproportionate.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPACT

By truly understanding the 'why', we can acknowledge the issues and the impact on the patient.

Within this early stage of complaint management, trust and rapport are important as we are looking to rebuild or strengthen the complainant's trust in the practice.

This is also key in exploring explanations and reasoning as the complainant will be more inclined hear and understand the information shared.

At this stage, my experience suggests an important element of this early interaction is to ask the patient 'what is their desired outcome?' or 'how do they see this complaint being resolved?'

The shared understanding of the situation, the individuals involved, and potential ways forward helps to identify and manage unrealistic expectations from the outset.

It can also identify any early opportunities to resolve the issue 'in the moment' without risking escalation by making assumptions about what the patient needs.



ANALYSE AND UNDERSTAND THE ROOT CAUSE

Once the root cause or key triggers are understood, we can consider whether this is a 'situational', 'systemic' or 'behavioural' scenario. By understanding the underlying issues, practice teams can address not just the symptoms but the core problems, preventing recurrence and improving overall operations.

This can also provide insight that helps practice teams to improve the assistance provided to vulnerable patients or those who would benefit from reasonable adjustments in terms of what and how information is conveyed and how practice procedures can be made more accessible.

For many complainants, a driving motivator is 'I don't want anyone else to be in this position'. A good understanding of the root cause and the patient's perspective on the causes can help to focus on the quality improvement output of a complaint, which can often be very impactful on patients.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

Patients can become frustrated with complaint responses, whether on the phone, in person or in writing, that seek to showcase the clinical care and skill of the practice but do not address the key points raised. Analysis of healthcare complaints indicate that the underlying causes relate to communication and expectations, and dental complaints also reflect this.

Having clarity around the points raised by the patient and confirming this by bulleting the issues to be covered helps to ensure we address the issue raised and not the complaint we would prefer to answer.

Where the number of points raised is extensive, it is worth exploring with the complainant if the points can be 'themed' or if there are three fundamental issues that are priority for the complainant. If it is agreed at the outset that the complainant would be satisfied with those points being addressed, this can provide both the patient and the practice with clarity.

Mediation insight suggests that a practice's assessment of the most critical issue may be very different to that of the complainant's.

Assumptions are the root of many escalating complaints. In my role as the head of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service and in handling other healthcare complaints, I have found the saying 'clarity is kindness' to be a real mantra.

Whether the complaint relates to expectations around outcomes, durability of treatment, or the interaction with practice team members as opposed to alleged clinical 'errors', the patient's assessment of 'value for money' will play a part in how satisfied a patient feels after attending the practice, and whether they raised a complaint.

With access to dental care currently under pressure, there is a potential barrier to patients raising issues early. Patients may disproportionately fear implications on future treatment or even their status as a patient of the practice.

This can inadvertently increase the



complexity of complaints as patients hold off raising some issues: these build up until the patient ‘erupts’ because of a perceived ‘minor’ or administrative issue.

REASSURANCE

Conflict resolution research highlights the importance of reassurance and its role in moving from dispute to resolution.

When considering the root causes of a complaint and why earlier attempts to resolve the issues have failed, understanding the complainant’s unmet need at that time and in that situation is often the key to resolving a complaint effectively.

OWNING THE RESOLUTION

We must see the process through. Complaint resolution will succeed or fail due to trust and rebuilding a connection between the patient and the practice, often on a one-to-one level.

Keeping to agreed timelines is important to complainants: when we miss indicated timelines, patients feel let down and unimportant. The trust and rapport built up during the complaint process can then be lost very quickly, escalating the complaint.

The complainant links what they see as an inability to follow through or ‘keep our word’ with earlier perceived failings and it reinforces those views. From the practice perspective, not meeting those expectations is rarely intentional, but due to other pressing priorities –but keeping in contact and explaining any delay will go a long way to maintaining trust.

Keeping patients informed about the steps taken to address their concerns can significantly enhance their trust and satisfaction. Follow up with them to explain the actions implemented and how these changes are working to prevent similar issues in the future.

This shows patients that their feedback has led to tangible improvements, reinforcing the value of their input.

The stretch is ‘can we overdeliver and delight this complainant?’ If we aim for this, we have a greater chance of some complainants becoming goodwill ambassadors for the practice. It can feel a real stretch but it is worth a shot!

THE LEARNING LOOP

Following up within the practice as we deal with a complaint, and once it has been resolved, is important for many reasons. It demonstrates that the organisation values

feedback and is committed to continuous improvement. This proactive approach can turn a potentially negative experience into a positive one, increasing loyalty and trust within the team.

A patient-centric culture should enhance a ‘one team’ and team-centric ethos. The two should not be mutually exclusive. Compassion, clarity and understanding ‘why’ are as important for colleagues as for patients. This is also a foundation for service-related quality improvement.

A shared, one-team approach to understanding why the practice may have agreed to resolve a complaint in a particular way helps colleagues to see the resolution as a person-centric and ‘win/win’ outcome, which brings matters to an end and allows the practice to invest the insight, rather than reinforce an adversarial patient versus practice mindset. These approaches will support staff wellbeing, trust in the leadership team, and overall staff retention at practice and sector level.

MANAGE THE ESCALATION

When local resolution is not possible, it is then important to have clear escalation pathways. In recent years we have seen social media and online reviews being used to escalate concerns and hasten responses.

This was once more prevalent in service sectors rather than healthcare. However, consumer behaviour has also developed and, increasingly, a proportion of patients will see social media platform as being the way to raise a concern. Accepting this and having clear pathways to bring those concerns into your process will help the team to act quickly as response time expectations are far shorter than we saw even five years ago, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public-facing online responses also help to demonstrate to other patients how you handle complaints, and the commitment to delivering excellent standards of care and service.

Complainants should be guided to the most appropriate forum, whether that is a regulatory or legal pathway or more proportionately, to an independent process such a complaint mediation or resolution service. These can help to keep complaints

in the most appropriate forum and avoid disproportionate escalation – which rarely benefits either the complainant, the practice or the individual healthcare professionals involved.

SUMMARY

Through my 25 years’ involvement in resolving healthcare complaints, I believe that complaints, when approached constructively, can be a powerful driver of positive change within an organisation.

By embracing a positive mindset, listening actively, analysing the root cause, developing and implementing an action plan, communicating with consumers, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, organisations can transform challenges into opportunities for growth and excellence. ●

CPD

ENHANCED CPD

Topic: Complaints handling

Educational aims and objectives: To discuss proactive approaches to complaint management in dentistry.

GDC development outcome: A
CPD hours: one

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QUESTIONS

1. According to the author, what should practical and focused training in communication and complaint handling cover?

- a. Active listening
- b. Empathy
- c. Problem-solving skills
- d. All of the above

2. What does ADR stand for in relation to this article?

- a. Alternative dispute resolution
- b. Average dental remuneration
- c. Altered defensive retaliation
- d. Angry disagreement response

3. According to the author, what is a fundamental ingredient in a customer centric culture?

- a. Team cohesion
- b. Active and engaged listening
- c. Company policies and procedures training
- d. Standing in the patient’s shoes

4. What saying has the author found to be a real mantra?

- a. Act, watch, listen
- b. Clarity is kindness
- c. Two ears for listening
- d. None of the above

FURTHER INFORMATION

To find out more, visit www.nockolds.co.uk/services/nockolds-resolution-adr/complaints-resolution-service.

