

# Mastering patient complaints: Effective strategies for dental practices – part two

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In the previous Ethical article on complaints featured in the June 2024 edition of the SADJ, we discussed the principles behind a complaints-handling procedure. In this edition, the reasons for patient complaints and the appropriate methods for handling them is addressed. It is further discussed how our behaviour can increase the risk of a patient complaint as well as the impact of useful communication skills in reducing and addressing patient complaints.

## Reasons for patient complaints

Patients lodge complaints for a variety of reasons, influenced by their individual circumstances. The motivations behind these complaints typically fall into the following categories:

- 1. Need to be heard:** Many patients simply wish to express their frustrations and be acknowledged. Validating their experiences and showing empathy can significantly alleviate their distress and help restore the professional relationship.
- 2. Desire for information:** Patients often lack detailed knowledge about dentistry. Unanticipated post-operative complications can be perceived as adverse outcomes if they were not explained beforehand.
- 3. Expectation of an apology:** While healthcare professionals may be hesitant to apologise for fear of admitting fault, offering a sincere apology for the patient's negative experience can be a powerful gesture. It is crucial to differentiate between expressing regret and admitting liability.
- 4. Requirement for remedial action:** Taking corrective steps to address the issue can greatly appease an aggrieved patient.
- 5. Reassurance of preventive measures:** Patients often seek assurance that measures are being implemented to prevent recurrence of the problem.
- 6. Loss of confidence and financial recompense:** Some patients, having lost trust in their dentist, may seek a financial refund to pursue treatment elsewhere. A minority may demand financial compensation, which can be either justified or unrealistic.

## Methods of receiving and handling complaints

Complaints may be conveyed via telephone, in writing or in person, and each mode requires a tailored response:

*Complaints by telephone* should ideally be met with a same day initial response by the complaints coordinator, the dentist or a senior member of staff. Try to give the patients an option: Would they like to make an appointment, have the dentist phone them back or come into the practice?

*Complaints in writing* should be acknowledged by return letter or e-mail, enclosing a copy of the written complaints procedure so that the patient knows what to expect. Many studies show that contacting the patient by telephone as soon as possible after the complaint is received establishes trust and indicates a commitment to resolving the complaint. Again, try to give the patient choices.

*Complaints in person* to the practice should be directed to the complaints coordinator, a dentist or a senior staff member. The availability of the coordinator or the dentist and the nature of the complaint will determine the best way forward. If it is not possible to spend sufficient time with the patient immediately, try to schedule the next contact with the patient as soon as possible. The sooner you make this time available, the better the chances of achieving a successful outcome.

## Communication skills to reduce complaints

Understanding why competent dentists may receive more complaints than their peers involves examining communication behaviours. Studies have highlighted differences between doctors with high and low litigation risks (Haynes, 2007):

- **Low risk of litigation:**
  - Spend more time with patients.
  - Know personal details about their patients.
  - Possess strong communication and listening skills.
  - Respect patients' dignity, privacy and time.
  - Are polite but maintain professional boundaries.
- **High risk of litigation:**
  - Interactions appear rushed.
  - Exhibit poor listening and communication skills.
  - Lack personal connection with patients.
  - Fail to establish patients' expectations.
  - Are perceived as rude or indifferent.

By consciously improving our communication behaviours, we can significantly reduce the risk of complaints. Key areas include:

- **Nonverbal skills:** Up to 70% of communication is nonverbal. Our "body language" helps to reinforce or contradict verbal comments and tends to override our verbal communication if contradictory (Silverman and Kinnersley, 2010). Being mindful of our body posture, eye contact and facial expressions is important.

Healthcare providers can use several strategies to consciously improve nonverbal communication. For example:

- Smile and maintain appropriate eye contact without staring.

- Show genuine interest in what the patient is saying. Avoid tapping your fingers, gazing out the window, checking the clock, yawning or any other actions that might suggest boredom or impatience.
- Sit whenever possible and lean forward to demonstrate engagement. Avoid standing over the patient in a paternalistic manner.
- Nod your head to indicate active listening.
- Keep an open and relaxed posture, avoiding crossed arms or other gestures that might imply reluctance to listen, disapproval or judgment. Encourage the patient to share all relevant information.

**Verbal skills:** The tone and manner of speech are crucial. When dealing with complaints on the telephone, these skills become essential as your voice and tone contributes a great deal to the patient's perception of you and your manner.

**Listening skills:** Healthcare practitioners may interrupt patients very early during consultations (Langewitz et al. 2002, Rhodes et al. 2004). Failure to listen may lead to the perception that the consultation was "rushed" or you are not interested. Active listening involves eye contact, not interrupting, nodding and recounting the patient's story and their emotion back to them.

**Benefits of effective communication**

Effective communication in healthcare is vital for patient health and safety, offering several benefits:

**Understanding patient needs:** Comprehending patients' perspectives, including their emotional states and individual requirements, is crucial for providing appropriate care.

**Tracking and communicating changes:** Clear, accurate communication is necessary to convey frequent changes in medications, procedures and administration, ensuring timely and proper patient care.

**Creating synergy among healthcare teams:** Flawless communication among healthcare professionals aligns staff members, reduces patient stress and increases efficiency.

Other benefits include:

**Making personal connections:** Building trust and compassion with patients and colleagues humanises healthcare providers and helps patients relax.

**Cultural awareness:** Open communication fosters understanding of diverse backgrounds, preventing awkward interactions.

**Better patient satisfaction:** Effective communication enhances patient satisfaction, decreases complaints and reduces readmissions.

**CONCLUSION**

Complaints are an inherent aspect of providing professional services. While they may initially seem like an affront or a threat, it is more constructive to view them as opportunities. Complaints can serve as a crucial feedback mechanism, highlighting areas for improvement and allowing healthcare professionals to address issues before they escalate to involve third parties.

A structured complaints procedure is essential in effectively managing and resolving most complaints. Such a procedure ensures that all complaints are handled consistently and fairly, providing a clear pathway for patients to express their concerns. This transparency and consistency helps to build trust and demonstrates a commitment to patient care and continuous improvement.

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