



# Managing complaints in dentistry.

Receiving a complaint is often an unexpected part of running any business, including a dental practice. No business is immune from receiving a complaint, regardless of how successful it is or how customer focused staff are. There can be a tendency to see a complaint as a personal criticism rather than constructive feedback. However, there can be positive outcomes when the situation is managed appropriately.

## Why do people complain?

There are many reasons why patients might complain about your practice and the treatment and service they've received. Sometimes a complaint will almost be expected following an incident; sometimes it will take you by complete surprise. Having an understanding of why people may complain can assist with managing a complaint if it occurs and potentially reducing the likelihood of further complaints. The following are some of the reasons why people may feel the need to complain.

**High expectations** – consumer expectations are increasingly high when engaging professional services. Patients pay what some may see as a lot of money for your service and will most likely see you as a highly trained and qualified professional. This view can influence their expectations about the service and outcomes they anticipate.

**Unrealistic expectations** – it's possible that patients may have unrealistic expectations about what they can reasonably expect from dental treatment. It's important to remember that most patients will not have the clinical knowledge you do and what's obvious or common sense to you, may not be to them. A dentist and their staff must assist patients to be clear and fully informed about the treatment being provided and the outcomes they can realistically expect. This requires ongoing discussions with patients and, where possible, written information to assist their understanding.

**To inform and be heard** – patients may wish to make a complaint about an incident or poor outcome simply so they are sure you and your staff are aware of what has occurred and how they feel. They may wish to complain to be listened to and acknowledged, especially if they have been adversely impacted. Not all complaints will lead to a formal demand for compensation.

**Belief that someone is responsible** – when something goes wrong, we often try to determine who's responsible. Sometimes someone is obviously responsible, sometimes it's hard to determine who's responsible and other times, there is no one person responsible but it's just an unfortunate set of circumstances. However, if a patient thought something had gone wrong and this led to them being harmed, it's quite possible they may complain with the intention of holding someone responsible and possibly liable.

**Aesthetic factor** – dental treatment provides many clinical benefits for patients as well as aesthetic benefits. These aesthetic benefits may at times add an extra level of expectation for some patients; they may not just want their teeth to be healthy, but want them to look good too. If a patient's teeth don't have the aesthetic look they expected or hoped for, they may consider complaining.

**Perceived discretionary spend** – unfortunately, some patients may view dental treatment as optional or an expensive discretionary spend. This is possibly because they don't understand the importance of good oral health. Therefore, if a patient has spent money on something they don't see as a necessity or that they could have done without, they may be particularly disappointed if the treatment didn't go according to plan.

### **The importance of managing complaints**

There may sometimes be a temptation to ignore a complaint and hope it'll just go away. Maybe the patient won't follow up. Maybe the incident won't occur again. This is a very short-sighted way to run any business as there are clear benefits to appropriately managing complaints.

Patients will generally expect to see their complaint dealt with quickly and fairly. When this doesn't happen, it's possible that further complaints will follow and the issue or concern could become a much greater one. Complaints may also escalate to Ahpra or another regulatory body.

Managing complaints should be seen as good 'customer service'. You rely on patients to keep your business afloat. When patients are unhappy with a service they've received, they can talk with their feet by not returning to the practice. Keeping patients happy and satisfied is more likely to see them continue to use your service and recommend your practice to others.

Complaints can provide a practice with an opportunity to review and improve their service. Receiving a complaint may highlight

an issue which the practice had not been aware of. When investigating and dealing with the complaint, the practice may wish to consider a change in a procedure to avoid that issue arising again in the future.

### **How to manage complaints**

It's advisable that every dental practice has a complaints policy. This means that the practice will have an agreed-to process which allows for all complaints to be dealt with in a fair and consistent manner. It also means staff know what to do, which is important as managing complaints can be challenging.

A key aspect in dealing with any complaint is listening to the person. Where possible, make time to sit down in a quiet space and give them time to express their concerns. Make the effort to hear what they have to say and take on board what they've told you. You may not agree with all they're saying, however it helps if you can try to understand the situation from their perspective. You may wish to ask them to document their concerns so you both have an accurate record of the matter. Avoid being defensive or taking the complaint personally as this may inflame the situation.

With low level complaints you may be able to offer a solution there and then. However, this won't always be the case. With more serious complaints, you should provide the person with an assurance that you'll investigate the matter and get back to them with a response at a later date.

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