Avoiding workplace discrimination

With the introduction of the Equality Act discrimination legislation is to have its biggest overhaul for many years. To make sure dental employers comply with the law, Sunil Abeyewickreme and Sarah Leyland discuss how the new developments apply

**Paternity leave**

Fathers will be able to take more time off while their baby's mother returns to work, making childcare easier to share for babies due on or after 4 April 2011. Currently, the law allows for a father to take two weeks' paternity leave following the birth of a child and during this period of leave they will receive Statutory Paternity Pay which is currently set at £123.06 per week.

From 4 April 2011, fathers will be able to take up to 26 weeks' paternity leave while their child's mother returns to work. A father will have a legal right to take the place of the mother at home during the second six months of the child's life. Up to three months' paternity leave will be paid at the same rate as statutory maternity pay if the leave is taken during the mother's 52-week maternity pay period. The remainder will be unpaid. Employers will need to ensure that maternity and paternity leave policies are changed in due course.

If the Conservative party wins the next general election it has expressed a commitment to extending paternity provisions, and it is currently proposing to extend the provisions further to allow both parents to take paid time off simultaneously.

**Sick note / fit note**

As long as employer sickness is often frustrating and costly for employers to take legal advice on their employment practices as soon as the Bill is finalised and receives Royal Assent, (probably April 2010). The Equality Act is expected to be in force by October 2010, so employers will have to ensure their employment contracts, recruitment and HR policies are updated.

The regulation set out the procedure to be followed when a request for time off to study or train has been made. If employers fail to comply, the maximum amount of compensation that may be awarded at the Employment Tribunal is eight weeks' pay.

**Statement of Fitness for Work**

For social security or Statutory Sick Pay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient's name</th>
<th>Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I certify that the patient on this form is fit to work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and, because of the following condition(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments, including functional effects of your condition(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This will be the case for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I advise you that: you may be fit for work, taking account of the following advice

| The patient is fit to work |
| The patient is not fit to work |
| Amended duties |
| Workplace adaptations |

The electronic 'fit note' will replace the current medical certification system

**Registration with ISA**

The Vetting and Barring scheme will have a huge impact on dental practices. It will mean that anyone in regular contact with children or vulnerable adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will have to register with the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA). From 1 November 2010 it will be an offence to employ or engage someone to perform services on a self-employed basis in a role, which involves contact with vulnerable adults or children, if that person is not registered. You are required to check all your employees even those who are not directly connected with vulnerable adults and children. It is a criminal offence not to check and carry a sentence of imprisonment of up to six months. Anyone unregistered with the ISA (because they started employment before 1 November 2010), will be able to apply for registration from April 2011. All employees who have regular contact with children or vulnerable adults must be registered with the ISA by 51 July 2015. This means that all employees of a dental practice will have to be registered.

**Keep up with change**

Dental employers should keep abreast of the changes and ensure that they are up to speed with recent developments that will affect the dental industry. Practices will need to ensure that they have the necessary policies and practices in place to address the changes.

The penalties for failing to adhere to employment legislation can be severe, therefore dental employers should take legal advice at an early stage.
Telephone tactics

Julia Dawson discusses the importance of great telephone communication, and how getting it right can help your practice thrive.

Think it's fair to say that the telephone is the unparalleled communication tool of time. In fact, 40 million people own a mobile phone in the UK, which is twice as many as read a newspaper every day. In business too, more and more service sectors are giving people the opportunity to conduct their business by phone. But, good telephone communication is not as easy as simply picking up a phone and talking...it's a learned skill.

Remember, patients don't have to do business with you, they choose to, and many things affect their choice. Good telephone tactics can not only give your practice the chance to be efficient and make a huge impact when speaking on the telephone, but are also a waste of time for your team, as they prefer to have lots of patients, there are other ways to deal with a message on a scrap of paper and when questioned about it, bring unsure of the detail. Even if a phone call is for somebody else the way you deal with that call is a demonstration of your business's efficiency. For example, if a message is from a 'Mr Jones', there may be hand written notes with the surname Jones in the practice and we cannot assume that the message recipient will automatically know which one it is.

A good first impression

How often have you met someone you've only spoken to on the phone and thought 'they're nothing like I expected'? By making sure that you always answer the telephone and greet your patients in a bright, friendly manner you can ensure that that's what your patients will expect when they come into the practice. Also, smiling when you answer the phone can make a huge impact - holding it to your voice and add a brighter, more welcoming tone.

Great service will also help you attract new patients, as existing patients will tell their friends and colleagues how good you are. A word of mouth recommendation is far more powerful than any advert and is a real indication of how effective your customer care is. Some companies offer tailor-made training days, specific to your practice's needs and can even incorporate a module focused on customer care and telephone tactics. Some of these courses can also count towards verifiable CPD when undertaken in accordance with GDC requirements.

Avoid time wasting

It may seem obvious but answering the phone promptly can really increase your customer service levels as it shows that caller how professional you are. It's good business practice to answer the phone within three to five rings. Answering too early can startle a caller while leaving a phone to ring incessantly gives the caller an image of inefficiency.

One of the things that often comes up when discussing poor call-centre experiences is being kept on hold for long periods of time. If you're unable to deal with a call straight away, let the caller know you will deal with their query and call them back. This not only makes the patient feel valued, but also allows you to look into more complex queries at a quieter time of day.

For practices lucky enough to have lots of patients, there are often periods of the day that have particularly high call volumes. By monitoring the calls throughout the day you can identify these times and ensure you have sufficient cover to attend to them. Automated answering services are also great outside of working hours, but try not to use them during the working day. They may be more convenient for your team, but are often a waste of time for your patients, as they prefer to speak to a real person and explain their queries in their own words.

Talking on the phone

When a person loses one of their senses their remaining senses become heightened. The same goes for telephone communication as speech and hearing is all you can rely on. As a result, things that interfere with speech such as typing on a computer, shuffling files and eating become more audible to the caller and can make them feel ignorant and less important than your other tasks. It's vital that you really concentrate on your conversation, giving your caller your undivided attention. It's also a good idea to hold the telephone properly - holding it under the chin will give a muffled sound to the caller and will hinder good communication.

Whenever you speak to a patient on the telephone you should always aim to be calm, clear and concise and avoid dental jargon. It's also really important to listen to the whole conversation, even if you think you know what their query or point of view is. By selectively listening you may miss important points.

Acknowledging their points and statements will confirm that you're actively listening to them and taking notes will help you deal with the call later.

Dealing with complaints

In my experience, the majority of complaint cases are caused by some form of breakdown in communication. It might be that a patient has not fully understood the implications of a particular form of treatment, or has chosen to disregard, or not take responsibility for, some aspects of their oral health. However, it's crucial that you listen carefully and show you're prepared to listen; even if you feel you've heard it all before - people generally need to feel they can get things off their chests.

Once you fully understand what the complaint is about - genuinely sympathise with the caller and to show concern about the issues they are raising. All too often people can slip into the slow, monotone speech patterns we associate with complaints departments, but this does not in any way show the concern you care about the person's problem. Instead, summarise the complaint back to them to show that you have really listened. If you need to check anything, give the caller your name and a firm commitment of when you will get back to them.

Taking Messages

We have all been guilty at some time or another of hastily writing a message on a scrap of paper and when questioned about it, bring unsure of the detail. Even if a phone call is for somebody else the way you deal with that call is a demonstration of your business's efficiency. For example, if a message is from a 'Mr Jones', there may be hand written notes with the surname Jones in the practice and we cannot assume that the message recipient will automatically know which one it is.

Time is wasted and business lost when messages are not taken accurately or are not answered promptly so it's a good idea to create a specific message form to remind you of all the details you need to note down. Many stationery companies supply pre-printed pads for this purpose or you can easily create your own, but remember that if you're using e-mail to send messages within your practice they should include the same information as the message forms.

It's clear that customer service is vital both in the practice and on the telephone and it's the constant desire to make each customer feel individual and welcome which will set you apart from your competition. By following this advice, you can not only ensure that your existing patients stay loyal to you, but that you attract new patients through word of mouth and great customer care.

About the author

Julia Dawson joined Denplan in 1990, running the Administration Department, before in 1992 moved to manage the Practice Support Services and Customer Advisors, Customer Advisors, Regis-