Protect your reception

Although cases of violence against front-of-house staff are rare, it's still a good idea to make some commonsense precautions to prepare for the worst. Glenys Bridges offers some advice.

As the current socio-economic climate leads people into circumstances over which they have no control, they're more likely to vent their displeasure at everyone who frustrates them. There can be no doubt that over the coming months, as times get harder, increasing numbers of our patients will feel economically traumatised and more likely to be react badly when we cannot meet their needs in the way they ideally wish. Historically, dental patients’ behaviour toward their dental careers has been good when compared to our medical colleagues, especially those in emergency medicine. However, this may not continue to be the case in the light of the current socio-economic climate.

Violent crime against individuals is fortunately still rare, but there is a real need to put in place sensible and commonsense precautions, formalised in practice policies and followed through with training as preparation for worst-case scenarios. This preparation should include a range of practical and behavioral measures to enable individuals to understand how their behaviour may contribute in to the build-up of critical events for example:

Body language
Fifty-five per cent of any message we give out is unconscious. What’s more, we are constantly giving out these signals and other people are reading our body language all the time. Try to be aware at all times, stand erect, walk straight, don’t necessarily look people straight in the eyes, but let them know that you know that you are interested in them and want to provide them with good care and services.

Raising the alarm
At the front of house, receptionists are often quite isolated from their colleagues, and when a potential flashpoint is building up this becomes problematic. Timely action can defuse this build-up. Initially it is vital to discreetly alert colleagues in the treatment rooms that a situation is brewing or has reached a point of real concern.

Many practices have a panic alarm that probably has more value for reassuring reception staff than offering a constructive contribution to managing critical incidents. Make sure a robust communication channel is available. Many dental computer software packages have a ‘red screen’ function, which can be used by receptionists to discreetly summon low-key support from treatment rooms.

Now that CPD is required as part of the commitment of dental registrants to keeping their skills up to date and relevant, all DCPs and non-registered members of the team such as receptionists need to ensure they include aspects of personal development, such as how to respond to undesirable behaviour from patients. This is one of the subjects covered in the CPD for DCPs courses provided for in-practice learning by the Dental Resource Company (www.dental-resource.com).

Glenys Bridges is managing director of the Dental Resource Company, and has provided training for dental teams since 1992. For more information, visit www.dental-resource.com or call 0121 241 6603.

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