Being regarded as a professional isn’t easy. And being a professional is even harder. It’s not just about saying the right things to the right people, but making sure professionalism runs through everything we do.

Back in 1956, the General Dental Council (GDC) was created to protect patients from unscrupulous people who were looking to cash in on dentists’ reputations for professionalism. More than five decades on, all dentists, dental nurses, dental technicians, dental hygienists, dental therapists, clinical dental technicians and orthodontic therapists who provide dental care in the UK must be registered with us.

Modern technology progresses at an ever increasing speed and can leave us behind if we don’t keep up-to-date. Changes in social opinion have traditionally moved more slowly. But these are shifting too.

We now live in a much less deferential society. Our relationships with everyone from our employers, to our MPs, doctors and dentists are much less formal. The huge influence of the mass media has played a key role in this. The way it now openly challenges institutions, business leaders and politicians has revealed their flaws and fallibilities like never before.

But this transparency can undermine respect. Or at the very least reveal a new willingness by patients and colleagues to ask questions and make demands of us. This change in attitudes can make it difficult to maintain a reputation for being a professional. As society changes, we inevitably have to change with it.

Certainly, in my years as GDC President, the concept of professionalism has been a constant feature. But what is meant by the word professional in practical terms – how does it benefit patients?

For those working in the dental profession, there are some easily identifiable measurements. To work within the field of dentistry in the UK, you must register with us. You must prove you are trained, qualified and of good character. And then go on to complete your continuing professional development to stay on the register. Those standards are our way of ensuring the profession maintains a solid and reliable reputation.

But what about first impressions? A dress code for staff, for example – is simple and instantly visible to patients. And good manners cost nothing. Being open and honest about charges and promoting your own complaints service are two other ways of treating your patients with trust and respect. What are the consequences of ignoring these? Research* carried out for the GDC found instead of complaining, most patients will simply leave your practice and find a new dentist – or avoid going to any dentist for as long as possible.

So how is the GDC working to continue to meet the standards expected of dental professionals in the future?

One way is revalidation – a hot topic for discussion in dentistry. We’re currently running feasibility pilots, aiming to explore how it can become a reality. Many dentists are worried it’s going to be another burden on them. But we believe it’s a key part of helping patients have confidence in whoever’s treating them. Not only proving they’re up to standard when they first register, but showing they can remain up to standard over the course of their working lives.

*Prepared by ERS Research – Stakeholder opinion of the GDC - June 2008

Hew Mathewson, GDC President

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