Reflecting on what you do
Changing the way you work might seem an easy undertaking, but for the individual clinician, it can seem hard to know where to start.

If you are motivated to take the time to reflect on a particular aspect of clinical practice it is also quite likely that you could be motivated to consider changing your point of view and the way that you work. Converting thoughts into action may not necessarily be complicated or difficult to achieve when viewed externally, but the task can sometimes seem insurmountable to an individual clinician. It is a matter of perception.

If you can accept that it would be logical to change your behaviour, hopefully the desire to adopt a scientific approach would also prevail – and so the clinician adapts existing protocols in the light of reliable new information. Beyond any personal inclinations, there can be other driving forces that can influence the rate at which the adaptation happens; the speed being commensurate with the authority of the source.

- Legislation (for example, Health and Safety)
- Advisory documents from recognised bodies of opinion (for example, NICE)
- Advice given during didactic teaching
- Peer reviewed dental articles
- Sales pressure from dental supply companies.

Instead of initiating a comprehensive review process under huge pressure of time, it would seem more sensible to regularly reflect on our own practise of dentistry to see how it measures up to the latest information disseminated from these different sources (of varying authority and attractiveness).

Varying results
Doing no harm is the ethical concept, which drives our professional life. Even if every clinician does their very best work when treating patients, there will still be a spectrum of different outcomes; there are too many variables to be eliminated. Any spectrum of acceptable standards will reflect the local availability of materials, equipment and training, but in general terms that standard improves with time. An awareness of the local and currently acceptable standards is essential if you want to avoid working in an outmoded style. This situation can be particularly relevant if you train in one environment for a while and then move on to work in a new practice; the high standards of your education must be allowed to prevail.

The more years you spend in practice, the larger the evidence base in dentistry that will accumulate, and since it is always accessible via the internet, it could be argued that a failure to keep abreast with the latest developments and to consider ‘if’ and ‘how’ they could be incorporated in your own clinical procedures might result in a sub-optimal treatment for patients. If this resulted in avoidable harm to the patient, not only would there be a breach of the fundamental ethical concept of ‘do no harm’, but it could also be interpreted as clinical negligence by omission.

Boosting career satisfaction
A career in dentistry is approximately 40 years. By adopting a reflective approach to the practice of dentistry throughout that career you can avoid such an accusation.

Indeed most members of the profession already do this to a greater or lesser extent. Interestingly, the more often you take the time to review your own understanding of topics, the easier and more natural the process becomes. In addition, the level of personal satisfaction derived from your work will increase – and the same will be true for the team around you.

This article was adapted from ‘On Reflection’ published by Dental Protection in 2008.

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Development Matters 2009

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