Cause for concern
Mark Phillips discusses when, how, and to whom dental professionals should raise concerns

For many dental professionals, the enjoyment of working in a practice comes from the teamwork involved in ensuring patient satisfaction. But team working can bring its own challenges, particularly if a colleague’s behaviour gives cause for concern.

A large, successful dental practice recruited two new staff members to help cope with an increasing patient register. The practice had an excellent reputation for providing a high standard of care and didn’t want this to be affected by the increasing demand for its services so it engaged a new dentist and nurse to work alongside one another.

Within the first month the dentist and nurse had formed an excellent working relationship, but soon after, the dentist had to take an extended period of leave due to illness and the nurse was allocated to work with a new dentist who was brought in to cover. They also quickly established a good working relationship, but after a few weeks, the nurse began to notice the dentist was starting to speak rather abruptly to patients and had on one occasion, lost his temper with a patient who was needle phobic but required a local anaesthetic to undergo a procedure. When the nurse attempted to speak to the dentist about the incident she was given short shrift and told to mind her own business.

The dentist’s behaviour continued to be of concern until one day the receptionist witnessed him pouring alcohol into his tea in the kitchen. When questioned, the dentist’s response was “everyone’s allowed a drink once in a while”.

The dentist worked at the practice for a total of seven months and during this time, a number of colleagues had witnessed inappropriate behaviour. Although the staff had discussed their concerns informally among themselves, these weren’t taken any further. On one occasion, another dentist at the practice pulled his colleague aside and attempted to discuss his behaviour. The dentist put his temper down to stress. Concerns about his behaviour were subsequently taken to the practice manager, who in line with the practice’s sickness policy offered the dentist a course of
counselling and some time away from work. Neither of these offers were acted upon and eventually, because of the potential risk to patients, the practice manager was forced to alert the GDC to his concerns and the dentist was asked to leave the practice.

A sensitive subject
The DDU recognises that it can be difficult to raise concerns about a colleague, particularly those in a position of authority. The fear of victimisation and bullying may be all too real but this is often not the case. In instances where behaviour may be putting patients at risk, you have a legal and ethical duty to say something. The GDC guidance on raising concerns states that: “The duty to put patients’ interests first and foremost must override personal and professional loyalties.”

• the problem is so severe that the GDC clearly need to be involved (for example, issues of indecency, violence or dishonesty, serious crime, or illegal practice)
• there is a genuine fear of victimisation or a cover-up

Will I be protected?
Under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) those working in NHS or private practice and those who are self-employed and contracted to provide NHS services, will be protected if they raise concerns about potentially illegal or dangerous practices, as long as you have acted in good faith and in the first instance, followed local level procedures. In addition, the GDC’s guidance in Principles of Dental Team Working makes clear that those who employ, manage or lead a team must support team members who raise concerns (paragraph 5.5).

Finally, the DDU advises you to remember that your duty to raise a concern should override any apprehension you may have about doing so, and that you should take steps to resolve issues at a local level, where appropriate, before contacting the GDC. Dental professionals who are unsure whether to raise a concern in the workplace should contact their defence organisation for advice.

References:
1, & 2. GDC Principles of raising concerns at work, page 6, p.1.1; page 8, p.3.6

About the author
Mark Phillips has worked predominantly in NHS dental practices as an associate and principal for 25 years prior to joining the DDU. He continues to work one day a week as a clinical demonstrator in the Prosthetic department and has recently been appointed chairman of the Dental Undergraduate Admissions Panel at GKT.