Focus on Standards: a review
Neel Kothari reviews the GDC’s new site ‘Focus on Standards’

Following on from the GDC’s updated ‘Standards’ document, a new interactive online tool named ‘Focus on Standards’ has been released to help registrants better understand the current guidance.

The web based tool is comprised of case studies, scenarios and FAQs that help to set out the GDC’s position when faced with potential breaches of professional standards and is freely available on the GDC website. The format of this tool will seem familiar to those who have ever undertaken online CPD, making it a slight shame that no verifiable CPD is available with its usage. In fact the legal disclaimer found at the beginning rather surprisingly states; ‘The case studies cannot be relied on to be clinically accurate’ and ‘Nor do the case studies intend to show the “correct” interpretation of GDC guidance, only one (or more) possible interpretation(s)...’ Confused? Me too.

The beefed up 2013 ‘Standards’ document more closely resembles computer software terms and conditions, with its heavy use of ‘should’s and ‘must’s rather than a straightforward ethical code of practice. In fairness to the GDC, this is simply a reflection of the world we live in, so it’s no real surprise that the GDC felt its arguments need help understanding the new standards.

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Overall, this web-based tool does a great job of highlighting some of the major issues currently affecting our profession. The combination of ‘FAQ’s’ and ‘learning points’ at the end of each section effectively expands upon the terms set out in the standards document, which in many cases can be rather confusing, and in this respect it does exactly what it says on the tin.

Unfortunately, where it falls down is in the issues it chooses to cover. The new standards document clearly goes much further than the former and in doing so has created many issues that remain vague to the profession. For instance, standard 3.2.5 (obtaining valid consent) states: ‘You must check and document that patients have understood the information you have given them.’

But how is this actually possible? Unfortunately without clarification of terms such as these the GDC has allowed itself a very wide berth to pass judgement on its members whilst at the same time is arguably not doing enough to clarify ‘good practice’ on more opaque issues such as this.

Going further, standard 6.2.2 states: ‘You should work with another appropriately trained member of the dental team at all times when treating patients in a dental setting.’

However the FAQ’s part of section six states that nurses do not need another team member when providing oral health education, but is less clear cut when the same situation is applied to hygienists stating: ‘It is not acceptable for dental professionals to be working alone on the premises when they are treating patients. Ideally, we would want all members of the dental team to have another member of the dental team with them in the same room, when they are treating patients.’

However, if in their professional judgement, they decide that having another member of the dental team on the premises who is able to offer them support if needed, complies with the requirement to ‘work with’ an appropriately trained team member and does not put patients at risk, and they therefore choose to work under this arrangement, they must be able to justify their decision. I suspect that the same can be inferred for dentists, but once again the GDC have not clearly nailed its colours to a mast on this rather controversial issue, after all let’s not forget that many healthcare providers (such as General Medical Practitioners) very rarely work with nurses and arguably treat some of the most vulnerable members of society. Leaving such ambiguities up to the interpretation of its registrants in my opinion allows far too much scope for the GDC to say ‘you’ve got it wrong’ whilst at the same time offering its members no actual guidance on what good practice is. This seems fundamentally unfair.

That being said, the issues that are covered here are generally handled very well and despite my concerns over what has been omitted from this online tool, in general it does a good job in helping its members better understand their professional duties. Overall, I would highly recommend this tool as a ‘must’ for anyone wishing to make sure they are practising within the rules.

http://www.gdc-uk.org/Dental-professionals/Standards/cases/Pages/default.aspx