Patient Confidential
Jane Armitage looks at patient confidentiality in the dental practice and beyond

Last week I attended the hospital for an appointment. As I sat there I couldn’t help but listen to a conversation that was going on between reception staff. It was all about a patient who had been diagnosed with cancer; it made me think how that person would feel if they knew that everybody in the waiting area had heard about their diagnosis. I think that this is a terrible scenario.

How many of us have our reception desks adjacent to the waiting area? Probably the majority - and how often do staff members congregate at some point of the day in the reception area? It’s normal to talk but it is inappropriate to discuss anything of a confidential nature, especially with patients in close proximity.

Dental teams have both an ethical and a legal duty to keep patient information confidential.

Sharing confidential information
Dentist-patient confidentiality is simple: as a patient you have a right to complete confidentiality. Anything said within the confines of a dental practice, becomes protected under the Data Protection Act. This includes the fact that you were even there. Dentists have no right to supply anyone, even close family members, with your dental records or information, without consent. However it can be shared with someone who has an interest, for example a Consultant who may also have an interest in your dental health.

Privacy is an important issue and confidentiality is a must.

In a dental practice there is always something to do and it’s important that the reception area remains as a reception area and not become an overspill of the staff meeting room.

Induction can form the basis of what you can expect from new staff members. Confidentiality should form a large part of any induction programme for new team members.

Being social
Social networking is another area where you can see that reference to incidents or names are being made, quite often the person whom comments are being referred to is oblivious to the fact that his/her business is being shared with the world. This is an area that needs addressing to ensure you don’t fall foul of the ethics of dentistry.

Staff meetings can be used to test the staff on the importance of confidentiality especially who you can share information with. Every dental professional should be made aware of the advice sheet Ethics in Dentistry (available
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from the BDA website - members only). Although it is heavy reading it is a useful tool to have within the practice as it determines what you can and can’t say and to whom.

The Information Governance toolkit developed by the Department of Health (https://www.igt.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/) is a great training tool and is a way of ensuring all staff has answered questions covering all aspects of data protection and confidentiality. I also refer to Standards for dental professionals, this is available from the GDC.

Your team need to know when they can divulge information to a third party without having adverse effect.

Disclosure

There are circumstances when personal information can be disclosed:

- Where expressly the patient has given consent to the disclosure
- Where disclosure is necessary for the purpose of enabling someone else to provide health care to the patient and the patient has consented to this sharing of information
- Where disclosure is required by statute or is ordered by a court of law
- Where disclosure is necessary for a dentist to pursue a bona-fide legal claim against a patient, when disclosure to a solicitor, court or debt collecting agency may be necessary

After writing this, a colleague of mine has read it and passed a comment which made me laugh and that was:

“Could someone tell Deidre about this as she has told all the UK about Tyrone’s girlfriend’s visit to the doctor?”

I replied: “Who’s Deidre?”, thinking we had a new employee...the answer came back: “In last night’s episode of Coronation Street!”

I give up; this was supposed to be a serious subject!

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‘About the author

Jane Armitage is an award-winning practice manager and has almost 40 years industry experience. She is currently a practice manager for Thompson & Thomas, and holds a Vocational Assessors award. She is also a BDA Good Practice Assessor, BDA Good Practice Regional Consultant, and has a BDA Certificate of Merit for services to the profession. She has her own company, JA Team Training, offering a practice management consultancy service, which includes on-site assistance covering all aspects of practice management with a pathway if required for managers to take their qualification in dental practice management. If you’ve any memories of the early 1970s or any specific choices of topics you’d like addressed, call Jane on 01142 343346 or email ja.armtage@tiscali.co.uk.

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