We have multi-skilled healthcare professionals in this country who provide dental health care to the population. Dedicated, committed and highly skilled dental teams are focused on offering high quality care for patients within and without the NHS. However, sometimes things can go a little awry and their professional integrity is called into question.

If this happens the overriding concern is always for patient safety but professionals also need support and sensitively to ensure they are treated fairly by the organisation employing them. After all, for the majority, an episode of sub-standard performance will not spell the end of a career.

With the right support and management of the situation most professionals will continue with their work and the treatment of patients. Quick and effective intervention regarding performance concerns should result in the desired outcomes – which must always include support for the practitioner. Importantly, all concerns must be treated in a fair and consistent manner.

Consider these questions:
• What constitutes a performance concern?
• Who could/should raise concerns?
• Do those who could or should raise concerns know how to do so?
• Who should manage a performance concern once it has been raised?
• Do you know the answers to these questions?

A ‘poor performance’ reporting system should be simple enough to follow so that everyone knows who to speak to and what will be done, whatever the concern involves. Sometimes it is difficult to voice concerns especially if it relates to your boss, however, it is important to remember your reasons for raising a concern at this point. Your in-house process and procedure will have identified individuals who will be able to help at this point.

Performance concerns may relate to:
• Standard of work – for example frequent mistakes
• An inability to handle a reasonable volume of work to a
required standard
• Unacceptable attitudes towards patients
• Unacceptable attitudes towards work or colleagues – for example, uncooperative behaviour, poor communication, poor teamwork, lack of commitment and drive etc.
• Poor punctuality and unexplained absences
• Lack of skills in tasks/methods of work required
• Lack of awareness of required standards
• Consistently failing to achieve agreed objectives
• Acting outside limits of competence
• Poor supervision of the work of others when this is a requirement of the post
• A health problem

If you have one of the above concerns, what comes next? Below are some important thoughts you may have and actions you may take:

• Consider the risk to patient safety
• Consider what your options are
• Ensure you are fully aware of the process you need to follow
• Ensure you know how to inform the individual
• Ensure you know that the systems are in place to support the individual
• Know if this concern needs to be dealt with formally or informally
• Decide what to do

What the GDC says you should do regarding performance concerns is contained in its code of behaviour Standards for dental professionals. Its guidance can be summarised as follows:

• The duty to put patients’ interests first and act to protect them must override personal and professional loyalties
• You have a duty to work within your knowledge, professional competence and physical abilities

This responsibility includes making sure that you:
• Get and follow medical advice if you know that you have a serious condition which you could pass on to patients, or that your judgement or performance could be seriously affected by a condition or illness
• Get help if you have any other problems which are affecting or may affect your professional performance
• Only carry out a task or type of treatment if you are sure that you have been trained and are competent to do it
• Do not put anyone off raising a concern about your health, behaviour or professional performance
• Co-operate fully with any procedure for investigating concerns which applies to your work

In my next article, I’ll discuss turning around poor performance.