

The Blurred Lines of Professionalism in Dentistry

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Background

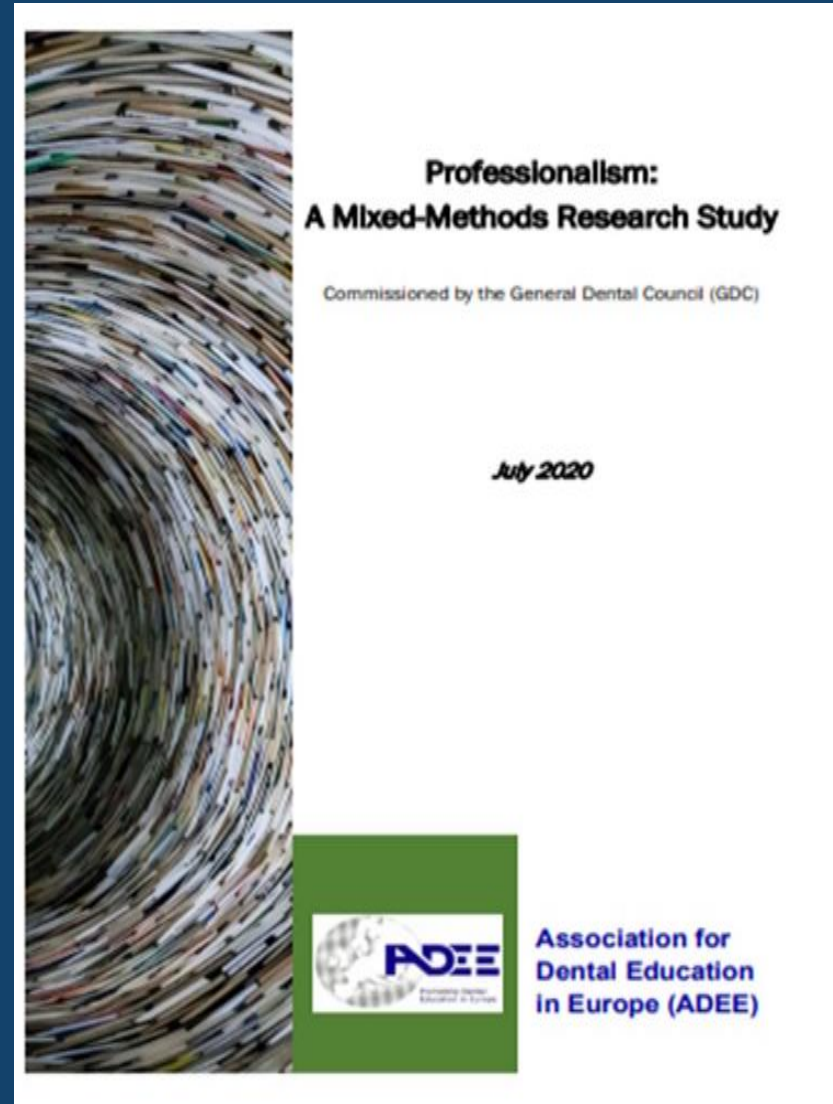
- **Professionalism** - central component of education & training of dental professionals.
 - GDC places professionalism at the forefront of their regulation of nine key standards they prescribe to govern dental professionals' conduct, performance, and ethics
- Substantially less focus on boundaries of professionalism, and lack of clarity about what constitutes an unprofessional behaviour or a lapse in professionalism.
 - *does one unprofessional action or isolated behaviour deem a dentist to be characteristically unprofessional?*
- [GDC Report 2020](#) - the report revealed greater complexity in defining an 'unprofessional' behaviour than a "professional' behaviour.



Explored views of dental professionals and members of the public about the boundaries between being '*professional*' and being '*unprofessional*'.

What leads a dentist's professionalism to be called into question?

Download **[GDC Report 2020](https://tinyurl.com/cta55665)** report at:
<https://tinyurl.com/cta55665>





- On-line Delphi survey - investigated perceived boundaries of acceptable behaviour– comments invited on statements (round 1 over two weeks – 1069 responses).
 - **Professional** (positive) behaviour? – essential, desirable, not necessary
 - **Unprofessional** (negative) behaviour? – highly, moderately, not professional
- Two rounds – numeric analysis in the [GDC Report 2020](#)
 - wealth of data obtained
- Analysis of 33,976 words of free-text data in round 1.
 - 772 free-text responses on the behaviours - *unprofessional* (312); *professional* (216); *other reflections on professionalism in dentistry* (244);
- Open-text responses transferred to Nvivo (v12) for pattern coding (13 codes identified) and latent thematic analysis.

Latent thematic analysis:
two lines of argument for
conditions in which a dentist's
professionalism is questioned

1. Circumstances related to workplace, that bear a direct influence on patient care
2. Circumstances that lead to the loss of patient trust.

review of processes that build
and foster patient trust and
thereby, maintain
professionalism.



Circumstances directly related to the Workplace and influence on patient care

Respondents' perceptions:

- one's professionalism should only constitute actions/behaviours that bear a direct influence on patient care.
 - professionalism applies exclusively to the workplace setting and a dentist's capacity to fulfil their work duties, specifically their "*clinical standards*" and "*clinical skills*"
- argued for an exclusive focus on the workplace - dentistry is an occupation, not a lifestyle.
 - "*I want my dentist to do good dentistry, not to be a paragon of virtue*". (member of the public)
 - dentists should have the right to a private life, without risk of their professional capacity being called into question
 - careers of some dentists had been impaired due to factors of no relevance to their role as a dentist
 - damaging not only to the dentist, but also to their patients



Circumstances leading to loss of patient trust

Respondents' perceptions:

- they concurred that clinical skills are of central importance - in contrast - contended that patient care extends beyond the clinical skills of the dentist and relies on the development and maintenance of patients' trust and confidence.
 - adopted a broader interpretation and emphasised wider attributes
 - confidentiality, integrity, and respecting patient dignity
- respondents highlighted dentistry's reputation as a 'profession' - an occupation that involves substantial training and a specific qualification.
 - upholding this reputation was regarded as paramount - they suggested that dentists should exhibit "*integrity and pride in their chosen profession*" in all arenas (member of public)



Review of processes that build and foster patient trust - thereby maintaining professionalism

'Trust and Care' is contingent on the patient/individual

- boundaries of professionalism in dentistry and the point where it is called into question appears to be rooted in the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between 'patient care' and 'patient trust', and where 'trust' may be threatened by disrepute.

Tailoring interactions and building relationships

- respondents felt that a uniform approach to every patient is unlikely to be suitable - approaches should be "*specific to the patient*" (Dentist).
- dental treatment is tailored to the oral needs of the patient, interactions should be approached in the same way.



Reflective practice and responding to a lapse in professionalism

- these respondents stressed the importance of dentists' responses to challenges and mistakes.
 - a dentist who makes a mistake, should acknowledge this mistake, and learn, reflect and improve from it
 - very different to a dentist who makes a mistake and does not respond or take accountability
 - these respondents encouraged dentists to be mindful and reflective of their practice





- focus on '*circumstances*' that lead to a dentist's professionalism being called into question.
- '*concept of patient trust appears to be where the ambiguity arises*';
 - blurs the boundaries between a dentist's life inside and outside the workplace
- results of this study suggest that a '*lapse*' in professionalism and being '*unprofessional*' are *not the same*';
 - strengthening professionalism relies on the dentist's response to an event and whether it is treated as a learning opportunity
- '*limitation of findings is acknowledged*' - particular focus on the role of the dentist;
 - recommend further research focusing on others in the dental team

Thanks



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Cymdeithasol



Findings of this investigation suggest an approach, to professionalism, mirroring a dentist's approach to clinical practice.

Recommendations

Learned and tailored interactions:

CPD should also be directed more to patient relationships.

- each interaction with a patient '*offers a learning experience*'
- dental treatments are tailored to the oral needs of the patient, '*interactions with patients should be tailored to their personal needs*' (social and cultural)

Judgement and reflection:

Reflection is perceived as an aid to development - helping dental professionals learn from experiences in practice.

- promotes the value in '*extending reflective practice beyond the work environment*'
- dentists should apply judgement to their persona and demeanour, and how they wish to '*portray the image of the dental profession*'
- suggest the application of a '*common sense approach to all activities*'
- '*think before one acts*' would be a simple way to maintain one's professional behaviour at all times, whilst not feeling one had to be a '*paragon of virtue*'