

What “professionalism” means to dental professionals, patients and others

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Background

Review of Professionalism for dental professionals across the continuum of education training and established practice:

commissioned by the General Dental Council (GDC) - UK regulatory body for all dental professionals

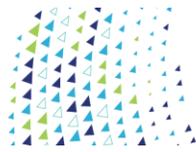
- Registrants are obliged to work in patients' best interests, but there is:
 - a lack of a shared understanding of 'professionalism'; or
 - what constitutes a 'professionalism' lapse.

- GDC, in partnership with ADEE, undertook
 - An extensive review, investigating broad aspects relating to professionalism in dentistry.

Aim

The primary aim for this review of professionalism was:

- **to explore and seek consensus on what ‘professionalism’ means to dental professionals and the public; and**
- **why being professional matters.**



Methods

Questions addressed in the Rapid Evidence Review of the literature and websites professionalism investigated:

More specifically, the review aimed to address the following research questions:

- What aspects of professionalism the public expects from dental professionals (what causes a patient to lose trust), and why these are perceived as important?
- How aspects of professionalism may be categorised (e.g. moral, clinical, personal behavioural, in work, outside work)?
- Whether expectations of professionalism differ in dentistry compared to other profession or between dental professionals?
- The teaching of professionalism - how the undergraduate curriculum prepares students to meet professionalism expectations and how this is evidenced?

Methods

Similar questions were addressed through:

1. Telephone 'scoping interviews' with 13 topic experts
 - (n=7 dentistry; n=3 other professions; n=3 medical education)
 - discussions were recorded and transcribed.
2. Focus groups
 - Four with dentists (n=19)
 - One with allied dental professionals (nurses/hygienist/technicians etc, n=13); and
 - Three with members of the public (n=19).
 - discussions were recorded and transcribed
3. A workshop was also held with representatives from the GDC (n=17) and a panel session on Professionalism with stakeholders (n=>120)
4. A Delphi process – survey – round 1 – 1000+ responses; round 2 – 650+ responses

All data were analysed thematically.

Results

- widespread acknowledgement that most dental registrants behave professionally.
- no agreed definition of ‘professionalism’ or what behaviours might represent a lapse:
 - it related to individual judgement, culture and context.
- generally, patients placed greater emphasis on appearance
 - they liked a uniform and personal hygiene.
 - they generally related ‘professionalism’ to behaviour within a clinic
- in contrast, some dentists saw the boundary between inside/outside work as more blurred.
- good communication and treatment explanation were valued by all.

Results

- others noted that being professional did not exclude making one-off errors/mistakes:
 - what was important was reflective practice.
 - interpreted as an enforcer of ‘professionalism’, some held the regulator in low regard.
- education for professionalism should include:
 - formal discussion of ‘real life’ scenarios - supported by the ‘hidden curriculum’.
- growing threats to ‘professionalism’ were seen in terms of
 - social media,
 - demands for cosmetic dentistry; and
 - limited time/funding.

Conclusions – Main Messages

- ‘Professionalism’ is a complex and an essentially contested concept.
- Despite areas of consensus, different stakeholders emphasised some aspects over others.
- There is scope to update current guidance and provide ongoing optional support.