

Professional duty of candour - dental

The General Dental Council's (GDC) *Standards for the Dental Team* requires dentists and dental care professionals to:

- Put patients' interests first (principle one);
- Be honest and act with integrity (standard 1.3); and
- Give patients who complain a prompt and constructive response (standard 5.3) and offer an apology and a practical solution where appropriate (standard 5.3.8).

All healthcare professionals have a professional responsibility to be honest with patients when something goes wrong. This is set out in *the professional duty of candour* statement published in 2016 by the GDC and seven other UK healthcare regulators. It states that:

"Every healthcare professional must be open and honest with patients when something goes wrong with their treatment or care which causes, or has the potential to cause, harm or distress.

This means that healthcare professionals must:

- *tell the patient (or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family) when something has gone wrong;*
- *apologise to the patient (or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family);*
- *offer an appropriate remedy or support to put matters right (if possible); and*
- *explain fully to the patient (or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family) the short and long term effects of what has happened.*

Healthcare professionals must also be open and honest with their colleagues, employers and relevant organisations, and take part in reviews and investigations when requested.

Health and care professionals must also be open and honest with their regulators, raising concerns where appropriate. They must support and encourage each other to be open and honest and not stop someone from raising concerns."

Key points

- As soon as you realise that something has gone wrong with a patient's care which has caused them harm or distress, or which could do so in the future, you must tell them clearly, in a way that they can understand. This duty applies even if the patient has not made a complaint about the care provided.

- Most patients will want to know what has happened, what has been done or can be done to put matters right and what it means for them. You should answer any questions fully and honestly, and let them know who to contact should they have any further questions.
- If a patient makes it clear that they do not want to know the details, you should respect their decision. In that situation, you should let them know that they can have further information later if they change their mind.
- Record the detail of your discussion with the patient (including their decision not to have further information, if applicable) in their notes.
- When a patient in your care suffers harm or distress because something goes wrong with their care, you should apologise as soon as possible. An apology is more likely to be meaningful to the patient if it is personal to them and relevant to what has happened, rather than being a general expression of regret.
- An apology is not the same as admitting legal liability for what happened. MDDUS members can contact the advice line for assistance in responding to a complaint, including how best to frame an apology.
- The goal of the professional duty of candour is to be open and honest when something goes wrong, and for everyone to learn from it.
- Legislation applicable in England & Wales and separate legislation in Scotland imposes a statutory duty of candour on organisations. The statutory requirements set out how organisations should tell those affected that an unintended or unexpected incident appears to have caused harm or death. This is separate from the professional duty of candour which applies to all registrants as individuals.

Guidance

General Dental Council:

[Being open and honest with patients when something goes wrong](#)
[\[The professional duty of candour\]](#)

[Standards for the Dental Team](#)

Further guidance on Apologies and professional duty of candour are available via the MDDUS Advice Library

[Advice Library](#)