



DENTAL
COMPLAINTS
RESOLUTION
SERVICE

2014

ANNUAL REPORT

CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Dental Council statement	5
Dental Protection statement	6
Facilitator's report	7

AWARENESS BUILDING

Since its establishment in 2012, levels of awareness and activity for the DCRS have grown significantly.

The Dental Complaints Resolution Service was launched in May 2012 as an alternative means to handling complaints registered following receipt of dental care and treatment within the Republic of Ireland, other than under the scope of the medical card (DTSS) or social insurance (DTBS) schemes. The Service is a voluntary initiative promoted by the Irish Dental Association and is open to complainants and dentists. Being voluntary, no dentist can be compelled to participate. It can be availed of without charge by IDA members while non-members pay a fee of €95 per complaint.

At the end of 2014, a review was commenced for consideration by the Board of Directors of the Irish Dental Association and the Council of the Irish Dental Union, with the objective of reviewing the operation of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service and to propose recommendations for change and improvement in its operation.

The review reflected interviews with a small number of individuals intimately acquainted with the operation of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service, the findings of a survey of private practice dentists conducted by the Association, and a review of a sample of cases conducted with the kind assistance of two dentists, two DPL representatives and a senior official from the UK Dental Complaints Service. We wish to thank all concerned for their generous and invaluable assistance.

Activity levels

The level of activity for the service has been consistently high. In 2013, the Service received 1,230 letters and 262 telephone calls, arising from which 130 complaints were received. In 2014, 384 calls and 1,250 emails were received, from which 158 complaints emerged.

Awareness of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service

The Dental Complaints Resolution Service is promoted primarily through its own website (www.dentalcomplaints.ie), through regular mention in the *Journal of the Irish Dental Association*, through communications to dentists by the Association and DPL in particular, and through intermittent media coverage. The Dental Council and the Association also

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promote awareness of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service in responding to queries received from the general public and from dentists. Among dentists, there is a reasonably strong awareness of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service. The IDA survey of private practitioners, which attracted 192 responses, shows that:

- 91% of respondents were aware of the Service;
- 80% were aware that this was a service provided by the IDA;
- 40% were aware of the Service's website;
- 74% were aware that the Dental Council requires dentists to have a procedure in their practice to handle complaints;
- 13% were very or extremely familiar with the operation of the Service while 60% were not at all or slightly familiar with the operation of the Service;
- 97% support the idea of the Service as a worthwhile initiative;
- 94% believe that dentists generally support the idea of the Service;
- 94% would avail of the Service if a patient raised a complaint that could not be resolved directly;
- 64% of respondents who availed of the Service (n=33) stated they were very or completely satisfied with the handling of a complaint by the service;
- 80% of those who availed of the Service claimed they contacted their defence organisation or representative within ten days of receiving a complaint;



FOR THE 12 MONTHS TO MARCH 2015, THE WWW.DENTALCOMPLAINTS.IE WEBSITE ATTRACTED 17,439 VISITS OR JUST UNDER 60,000 HITS.

- 32% of those who availed of the Service believed the settlement was unfair or very unfair, 32% thought it was about right and 36% thought it was fair or very fair;
- 64% were very or completely satisfied with the timeliness of the response and ongoing dialogue with the Service; and,
- 60% were very or completely satisfied with the written communications with the Service.

For the 12 months to March 2015, the www.dentalcomplaints.ie website attracted 17,439 visits or just under 60,000 hits.

We expect that extra resources will be needed to enable the Service to cope with the increasing level of enquiries being received, lessons learned from the first ever review, and also to reflect best practice and good governance.

In the meantime, we are pleased to commend the service and to thank all who have contributed to its continued success.



Dr Peter Gannon
President
Irish Dental Association



Mr Fintan Hourihan
Chief Executive Officer
Irish Dental Association

MUTUAL BENEFIT

Dr Eamon Croke, President, Dental Council of Ireland, says that successful management of a complaint is liberating.

A complaint has been described as “an expression of dissatisfaction whether justified or not” (BS8600:1999). The majority of complaints received by Dental Council from patients about dentists or dental treatment are broadly consumer type grievances. The types of complaints received revolve around dissatisfaction with treatment, communication issues, fees or adverse events. It is unsettling to note that 25% of communication complaints relate to dentists’ behaviour after the patient brought a concern to their attention. All of these types of complaints are within the remit of all dental practices to address and resolve to mutual benefit.

There is evidence that complaints in general are rising. Consumer protection has become a central concern for governments. As consumers we are encouraged to complain if we are dissatisfied. The right to complain is enshrined in consumer laws and encouraged by many State agencies. Healthcare provision is now regularly considered a service provision with patients portrayed as consumers. Every practice should already have a protocol in place to manage complaints.

5.4 We expect your practice to have a complaints procedure on public display which clearly outlines how:

- to make a complaint, and
- how your practice would deal with it.

This procedure should identify by name the person who deals with patients’ complaints.

Code of Practice relating to: Professional Behaviour and Ethical Conduct (2012)

There is universal agreement that complaint management has a huge effect on outcome. Successful complaint management requires the 4 Cs: courtesy, consideration, communication and competency. Courtesy is essential to the prevention and resolution of complaints. It is not an admission of guilt to apologise to a patient upon receipt

of a complaint while seeking time to consider the complaint – it is good manners. It is also courteous and sensible to listen to the complaint in a calm, attentive manner, giving the patient the chance to air their grievance and you a chance to understand their situation before considering your response. It takes time to consider a complaint, to appreciate the full picture and to communicate your solution, but this should be done within a specified (short) time period. Good communication is critical to successful complaint management. Delivering your solution by phone or face to face can add value to the solution if you have the required communication skills. Training is the safeguard to the prevention and resolution of complaints and should involve all members of the dental team. Keep clear, comprehensive, contemporaneous records of all complaints. Successful management of a complaint is liberating. It allows the patient and your practice move on from the experience providing the patient with a positive impression of your practice, and your sense of responsibility to and care for your patients. It allows you and the members of your team to learn from the complaint, helping to avoid similar situations. Clearly, a well-handled complaints procedure limits the stress for all concerned and reduces the time spent on such matters. It is also cost-effective.

I think it is true that most people do not want to complain unless compelled to do so. It is within the capacity of all dental practices to minimise that risk to the benefit of all.



Dr Eamon D Croke
President
Dental Council

SUCCESSFUL FACILITATION IS WELCOME

Good communication can help prevent complaints, but when they do arise, the Dental Complaints Resolution Service is providing excellent facilitation.

Even in the best dentist-patient relationship, a problem may occur. However good a dentist is, and however dedicated a patient may be, there may be times when a complaint or concern can arise.

The creation of a sound dentist-patient relationship is the basis for good communication. It demonstrates a desire on the part of the dentist and the patient to discuss and agree the course of treatment, and the expectations of the outcome can go a long way toward establishing a relationship of trust and confidence. Similarly, if a patient has a concern he or she should let the dentist know as soon as possible; sometimes the dentist may have no idea that there is a problem or concern, and would like the opportunity of investigating the situation and resolving it as soon as possible.

Even when the dentist has a practice complaints procedure in place, there can be occasions when a patient may be too embarrassed or reluctant to contact their dentist. In reality, a dentist, like any other professional, will want to deal with a complaint or a concern professionally and courteously once they become aware of the problem.

Past experience has shown that when a complaint is handled well, the professional relationship between the dentist and the patient can still be re-established. A patient who has had their complaint resolved can even go on to be one of the dentist's greatest supporters. The days are long gone when a complaint was only seen in a negative way. Complaints can be a real opportunity to improve communication, or to explain some aspect of dental care.

Certainly, the introduction of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service (DCRS) has increased patient awareness of practice complaints procedures. When a problem or misunderstanding cannot be resolved between a dentist and a patient, the DCRS is there to help. You can see from their annual report that a number of complaints can be resolved with their input.

The alternatives are instructing a solicitor or making a complaint to the Dental Council. However, the Dental Council only investigates fitness to practice issues rather than straightforward patient complaints. Many

of us are aware from recent media coverage that the legal process can be slow and costly, and very often the outcome does not entirely satisfy the patient as it does not normally include either an explanation or an apology. These fundamental issues are often what a patient wants most.

The fact that the DCRS is easy to access, simple to use and often results in quick resolution, to the satisfaction of both the patient and the dentist, is likely to have contributed to its success.

The DCRS's Michael Kilcoyne has proved to be an accessible, and successful, facilitator and the Irish Dental Association's commitment to the service is to be welcomed.

The DCRS has now been in place for three years and the number of complaints already resolved is a testament to its success and to the dental profession which has embraced the concept, and the team behind the Service itself.



Dr Sue Boynton

Senior Dento-legal Adviser – Head of Dental Services Ireland
Dental Protection



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MORE AWARENESS, GREATER ACCEPTANCE

In 2014, Michael Kilcoyne, the Facilitator of the Dental Complaints Resolution Service, accepted 158 cases and resolved 36 complaints. He reports that there is now greater awareness of the Service among the public.

In 2014, 158 cases were accepted by the Dental Complaints Resolution Service (DCRS or Service). Many of these were resolved directly between the dentist and the patient. A total of 36 complaints were resolved through mediation, and 26 of these were resolved by a full or part refund of fees to the patient. Three were resolved through re-treatment. Two cases were resolved by payment of fees for further treatment and one case was resolved by an apology. Three patients withdrew their complaints, one of whom is believed to be pursuing legal proceedings. A further complaint was resolved by the dentist issuing a Med 2 Form to the patient.

In 2014, 384 calls and 1,259 emails or letters were received by the Service. Out of that contact, 158 cases were accepted. Seven cases were not accepted as they were for treatment provided under the medical card scheme (the DTSS). Of the complaints that were accepted, 64 related to fees, 62 covered clinical matters, and 32 related to communications.

The DCRS is an independent service for patients who have failed to have a complaint about a dental matter resolved satisfactorily in the practice where the issue arose. While the Service was established by the Irish Dental Association, it operates entirely independently.

All dentists are required by the Dental Council of Ireland to have a formal complaints procedure in place for their surgeries. Where a patient has tried to resolve a complaint with a dental practice through its complaints procedure and is still not satisfied, the patient may escalate the complaint to the Service. The dentist must also accept the complaint will be handled by the Service. If a dentist is a member of the IDA, the work of the Service is free. A modest fee is charged to non-members to avail of the DCRS.

Comment

I wish to make three observations on the operation of the Service in 2014. Firstly, good progress has been made in the daily workings of the Service. As it has now been in operation since April 2012,

sufficient experience has been accumulated to allow for a speedier resolution of routine matters that result in complaints.

Secondly, there is an increased awareness among the public that this Service exists to help them to resolve a dispute with their dentist. While the matter under dispute can be highly significant, or merely mundane, the fact that it is under dispute can cause considerable distress to both the patient and the dentist. The availability of the Service is helping to reduce the difficulty involved in resolving a dispute.

Thirdly, there is now a high level of acceptance of the *bona fides* of the service among the dental profession. This is leading, in turn, to a high level of co-operation with the Service.

ADVICE TO DENTISTS

The most important advice that the Dental Complaints Resolution Service can offer to dentists is to listen closely to their patients. Even if the dentist believes they are not in the wrong, they should address their patient's views. There will always be a certain amount of complaints when you are providing a service, and sometimes these can be resolved, or even avoided, simply by communicating.

ADVICE TO PATIENTS

If you have a complaint against your dentist, you should always raise it with the dentist first. Explain the problem calmly and clearly, and try to resolve the issue. If necessary, seek a second opinion from another dentist. If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily, contact the Dental Complaints Resolution Service. In order to deal with the case, the Service must receive your complaint in writing, and once that is received, work will commence on resolving the complaint as soon as possible.

COMPLAINTS RECEIVED FROM JANUARY 1 TO DECEMBER 31, 2014

Patient contact

Number of calls received	384
Number of emails/letters received	1,250
Number of complaints not accepted, i.e., outside remit, or out of time	7*
Number of complaints accepted	158

* Medical Card complaints not accepted

Dentists

IDA members Approximately 65% are members of the IDA

Resolution

Time taken from receipt of complaint to resolution 36 cases have been resolved since January 1, 2014. Three patients withdrew.

Brief details of resolution

Explanation	1 Med 2 Form issued
Apology	1
Re-treatment	3
Refund of fees/part refund	26
Payment of fees for remedial treatment	2
Unable to resolve	3**

** patients withdrew (one to solicitor)

Type of complaint

Fees	64
Clinical	62
Communication	32

SUBJECT OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED SINCE JANUARY 1, 2014

Treatment

Diagnosis	3
Fillings	12
Denture	5
Crown/bridge	9
Root canal	9
Orthodontic	5
Oral surgery – extractions	7
Implants	2
Scale and polish	1
Infection control	

Non-treatment

Failure of treatment	4
Postoperative pain	7
Pain during treatment	1
Failure to address pain	3
Failure to explain treatment costs	7
Failure to explain treatment details	9
Treatment plan not followed	2
No or inadequate treatment plan	4
Refusal to treat	2
Problems with continuing care	4
Consent not given	2
Rudeness	2
Failure to address complaint	16
Other – cost	52

OUTLIER IN PATTERN OF COMPLAINTS

In the experience of the Facilitator, 85% of the complaints he accepts are single complaints about a dental practice. He occasionally gets two complaints arising from a practice but has experience of only one practice against which three complaints have been made – all of which he considers relatively minor matters. Therefore, his experience of having one practice having six complaints of a serious nature accepted for investigation over a period of 18 months is a matter of concern to him. He is of the opinion that there are items likely to be included in the forthcoming Dental Bill, which, when enacted, would allow for strong action to being taken against such a practice by the Dental Council of Ireland.



Michael Kilcoyne

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