Team working is a vital element in the effective provision of patient care by dentists and all categories of dental care professionals (DCPs):

- dental hygienists
- dental therapists
- dental nurses
- dental technicians
- clinical dental technicians
- orthodontic therapists.

All DCPs must be registered with the GDC. As well as many privileges, such as professional status and the chance for DCPs to own and run their own practice, registration brings with it responsibilities.

All members of the team should be aware that they could be subject to the disciplinary procedures of the GDC.

The introduction of direct access in 2013, enabling patients to receive treatment from hygienists and therapists without a prescription from a dentist, also opens individual DCPs to the possibility of complaints and claims which would once have been made to the prescribing dentist.
The GDC’s role is to protect patients and set high standards of dental practice and conduct through statutory registration. Only suitably qualified, registered dental professionals are legally permitted to practise dentistry.

As a dental professional you are expected to contribute to maintaining high standards of patient care, and to make the interests of patients your first priority. You need to be able to show evidence of training and continuing professional development and must take action if an inadequate standard of care, or anything else, puts patients at risk.

**Key points**

1. All dental professionals must be registered with the GDC to practise in the UK. They should be listed in the GDC’s dentist or DCP register. To be listed you must hold a qualification approved by the GDC for registration.

2. The GDC holds a number of dentist specialist lists covering areas such as oral surgery and orthodontics. Dentists cannot call themselves a specialist in a particular area if they do not appear on the appropriate list.

3. Each GDC-registered member of the dental team is individually responsible and accountable to the GDC for his or her own actions and omissions, and for the treatment or procedures they carry out. If the GDC receives a complaint about the professional conduct or fitness to practise of someone on its registers, the case may proceed to a full public hearing by a GDC fitness to practise panel.

4. Under direct access arrangements, dental hygienists and therapists can treat patients within their scope of practice without the need for a full mouth assessment by a dentist, provided they are trained, competent and appropriately indemnified. However, there has been no change to relevant drugs legislation and regulations which means only dentists can prescribe prescription-only medicines. This includes some drugs used to treat medical emergencies, local anaesthetics and fluoride varnish. Only dentists may sign a patient group direction for a dental practice or clinic, report on radiographs, or prescribe/oversee tooth bleaching treatment.

5. Continuing professional development (CPD) is compulsory for all dental professionals to ensure their skills are kept up-to-date.
   - Dentists must complete at least 250 hours of CPD over a five year cycle of which a minimum of 75 hours must be verifiable CPD. Their CPD cycle always ends on 31 December.
   - DCPs must complete at least 150 hours of CPD with a minimum of 50 verifiable hours and their cycle ends on 31 July.

   CPD records must be kept for at least five years after the end of the cycle in which they were completed because the GDC may ask to see them.

6. The GDC has the power to remove or restrict a registrant’s right to practise if it is considered to be in the public interest.

7. Statutory registration does not extend to practice managers or receptionists.

**Our advice**

Dental professionals need to ensure that they are registered with the GDC before carrying out treatment. The **Dentists Act 1984** makes it an offence for a person who is not a registered dental professional to practise dentistry, or hold themselves out – whether directly or by implication – as practising or being prepared to practise dentistry.

Membership of the DDU would cease on removal from the GDC registers, unless the MDU Board of Management decides otherwise.

Working without indemnity contravenes GDC guidance and is in breach of the NHS General Dental Service regulations. The GDC can suspend a dental professional found to be working without indemnity.

**Checklist**

- Is your GDC registration valid and up-to-date? Do you keep your skills and knowledge up-to-date and have a planned CPD programme?
- Do you keep a record of all your CPD activity?
The dental team varies according to the needs of the patient. It may include a dental therapist, a medical practitioner or other members of the wider healthcare team. Dental professionals have an ethical duty to treat all colleagues fairly and with respect.

Key points

1. GDC registered team members assume **personal responsibility** in clinical governance and practice management. Failure to address these could lead to a complaint, disciplinary action or even criminal allegations, either individually or jointly with other members of the team. Such responsibilities include:
   a. making appropriate fee claims
   b. being open and honest with patients regarding treatment
   c. health and safety at work
   d. patient confidentiality
   e. maintaining adequate professional indemnity in the event of a claim for clinical negligence.

2. Registered dental professionals could be held responsible for the actions of anyone in the team who is not registered with the GDC e.g. receptionists, and should ensure they are appropriately trained.

3. Team members should **raise concerns** if inadequate standards of care are placing patients at risk, for example if a colleague’s health or performance is causing concern.

4. Dental professionals should work with (which means having easy access to) another appropriately trained member of the dental team at all times when treating patients in a dental setting except:
   a. in out-of-hours emergencies
   b. when providing treatment as part of a public health problem
   c. in exceptional circumstances which could not have been foreseen. If exceptional circumstances arise, they must assess the possible risk to the patient of continuing treatment, explain the risks to patients, obtain their consent and make a note of this in their record.

5. There should always be at least one other person available in the working environment to deal with **medical emergencies** when treating patients.

6. Dental professionals should only delegate or refer a patient to a member of the team who is trained, competent and appropriately indemnified. The request should be clear and include all relevant information. Likewise, team members should only accept a referral or delegation if they have the knowledge and skills and believe what they are being asked to do is in the patient’s best interests. If in doubt, discuss with the colleague concerned.

7. Dental professionals should be aware of tasks which are outside their **scope of practice** or competence and be clear about the process for referring patients, including the need for patient consent.

**Our advice**

All members of the dental team are expected to work together in patients’ best interests which means effective communication and co-operation between team members is essential.

**Checklist**

- Do members of the dental team know how to raise concerns?
- Are members of the dental team aware of what to do if they are uncertain about a treatment plan?
- Are patient clinical records maintained and updated by all members of the dental team involved in a patient’s care, including referrals?
- Are all members of the dental team aware of their scope of practice as defined by the GDC?
- Are all members of the team able to seek advice and indemnity if a patient makes a complaint or claim against them?
8. Dental hygienists and therapists with the necessary training can carry out the first cycle of tooth bleaching provided that a dentist:
   a. has assessed the suitability of the patient for the treatment, and
   b. is on the premises at the time of the first bleaching treatment.

9. Team members should ensure patients **consent** to treatment. This includes informing them who makes up the team providing their care, who has overall responsibility for their treatment and the circumstances in which information about them may be shared with others involved in their healthcare. (See section 3.2 **Valid consent**).

10. The GDC states that all registered dental professionals should ensure that patients are able to claim any compensation they may be entitled to by being **indemnified** against claims at all times i.e. see below.

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**Indemnity**

The main purposes of indemnity are to protect the dental professional against the financial consequences of clinical negligence claims, and to safeguard patients by providing access to financial compensation.

Dental professionals who are required to register with the GDC are fully accountable for their own actions. In the event of a complaint or claim for clinical negligence, they cannot automatically transfer responsibility to their employer, practice owner or the manager of their employing hospital/trust.

The GDC expects all registered dental professionals to have adequate professional indemnity, either personally or through their employer, and to check this is in place before treating patients.
The GDC expects dental professionals in charge of teams to demonstrate effective management and leadership skills.

Key points

1. It is the team leader’s responsibility to ensure all team members are suitably qualified, registered with the GDC where required, and have access to appropriate training. They should receive a proper induction and opportunities to learn and develop.

2. Team leaders should ensure the working environment is hygienic and safe and that there is no discrimination against team members.

3. The team leader should ensure colleagues are not asked to undertake tasks that go beyond their training and skills. They should ensure team members understand their roles and responsibilities and that they are not pressured to carry out a task if they say they are unable to.

4. Team leaders must provide team members with a way to raise concerns e.g. where there are doubts about the health, behaviour or competence of a colleague.

5. Team leaders must ensure all staff, including non-registered members, are trained in how to respond to medical emergencies and practise together regularly. The GDC says there must be at least two people available in the working environment to deal with medical emergencies when treatment is planned to take place.

6. Practices are expected to display details of the dental team, including their GDC registration number where appropriate, in the reception or waiting area.

7. The team leader must review and monitor individual and team performance, including regular appraisals.

8. The practice owner must ensure there is an effective complaints procedure in place and team members are familiar with it.

Our advice

If a dental professional employs or manages an unregistered person they could be liable to fitness to practise proceedings and possible erasure from the register.

We strongly recommend that as a team leader, you check the registration status of all registrable team members, ensure their indemnity record remains unbroken and that they have met their CPD obligations.

Checklist

- If you own, run, or manage a practice:
  a. are there mechanisms in place to check that all dental professionals are continuously registered with the GDC and adequately indemnified?
  b. do you ensure all staff are complying with their CPD requirements?

- Is there a process in place to:
  a. monitor and review individual and team performance and raise concerns relating to practice policies and procedures?
  b. ensure team members are trained in complaints handling?

- Do you hold regular training sessions for staff in emergency procedures, including practising simulated emergencies against the clock?

Further reading

Standards for the Dental Team (2013), principle 6, GDC
I have just joined a new practice and been asked to take over the treatment of a number of patients from a colleague who is reducing his workload before leaving. The first patient I have seen has advanced periodontal disease and undiagnosed caries in several molars. What should I tell the patient and should I report this?

**Our response**

Many dental professionals are understandably reluctant to report a fellow professional. However, the GDC makes it clear in Standards for the Dental Team (2013) that all members of the dental team are ethically obliged to act in the best interest of patients and states that ‘you must act promptly if patients or colleagues are at risk and take measures to protect them’ (paragraph 8.2). It goes on to say in paragraph 8.2.3 ‘Where possible, you should raise concerns first with your employer or manager. However, it may not always be appropriate or possible to raise concerns with them, particularly if they are the source of your concern.’

If you do not raise your concerns, you may be regarded as partially to blame and perhaps asked to give an explanation to the GDC yourself if you choose to turn a blind eye to poor performance which has resulted in harm to a patient.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 offers protection for those who honestly raise concerns about wrong doing or malpractice in the workplace. You should tell the patient what you have found and your proposed treatment plan. If the patient then wishes to make a complaint, you can advise him or her of the practice complaints procedure. If the patient asks you to comment on whether your predecessor’s treatment was negligent, you should explain that as the current treating dentist you are not in a position to advise on whether what you have found constitutes clinical negligence or to judge the actions of your colleague. Ensure you have made a note of the discussion in the patient’s dental records.

There may be a reasonable explanation for what you have found and you are not expected to judge whether your colleague is competent to practise. However, if you report concerns, you need to be sure that you can justify them if called upon to do so at a later date.

Depending on the nature of the concerns and your relationship with the colleague, you may consider discussing matters directly with him or her. If you are daunted by the prospect of challenging a colleague directly, you could approach another more senior colleague to discuss your concerns.

If, after seeking advice from colleagues or professional bodies, you decide you need to take matters further, it can help to prepare an account of events or incidents that concern you, with dates and details of your concern.