

Student professionalism and fitness to practise Standards for the Dental Team Case studies

Principle 5

Have a clear and effective complaints procedure



Abiola

Abiola is a student dental hygienist in the final year of study, cleaning a patient's teeth on a work placement in a dental practice. After the procedure the patient wants to complain that the use of the scaler was too painful.

Student dental hygienist

During the treatment the patient seemed nervous and winced a couple of times. Abiola paused and checked the patient was happy to continue with the treatment. The patient said the procedure was hurting and asked if she could be gentler. Abiola proceeded and the patient didn't ask for her to stop. At the end of the treatment the supervisor left the work station to check another student. While the supervisor was absent the patient said that the procedure was very painful and that they would like to complain and feed this information back.

What do you think Abiola should do next?

Select an option:

- explain to the patient that this procedure can be painful and that she followed the correct guidelines and had stopped to check what was wrong
- tell the patient that she would ensure this wouldn't happen next time because she could administer local anaesthetic and that she was very sorry that her treatment had caused pain

- apologise to the patient, and say that she valued feedback. Then explain that there was a complaints process, what it was, and tell the supervisor what happened when they returned to the room. Consider asking for guidance on her technique.

See what Abiola did next...

Abiola was worried that a complaint might affect her chances of passing the final assessments. Abiola explained to the patient that it was quite normal for this cleaning process to be painful and that she had stopped to check with the patient that they were happy to proceed. The patient said they were unhappy with the treatment and although they were given a chance to explain that they were in pain and that they were happy to proceed once they had received reassurance that she would adjust the technique to take account of this they still found the process painful. The patient felt quite stressed and left before the supervisor returned. Abiola didn't report the complaint to her supervisor. The patient left a complaint with reception. The receptionist then informed her supervisor at the end of the day.

Abiola's supervisor raised the issue the next day. Abiola admitted that the patient had wanted to complain but that she felt she had done everything she should during the appointment. Her supervisor explained that the patient has a right to complain and receive a prompt and constructive response including an apology where appropriate. Feedback is a normal part of professional life and the information can help improve the service provided and your work. Abiola said she recognised this. They discussed the appointment and agreed that Abiola had acted appropriately when she noticed the patient appeared to be in pain. They concluded that in a similar situation it would be beneficial to check the patient was comfortable more regularly. Her supervisor also offered to look at Abiola's technique to see whether she required some further training and help.

This was the first time this had happened and Abiola responded appropriately once the issue had been raised. The supervisor therefore didn't raise a concern about her student fitness to practise. However, it was made clear that if it happened again a concern may be raised.

GDC principles

5.1 Make sure that there is an effective complaints procedure readily available for patients to use, and follow that procedure at all times

5.2 Respect a patient's right to complain

5.2.1 You should not react defensively to complaints. You should listen carefully to patients who complain and involve them fully in the complaints process. You should find out what outcome patients want from their complaint.

Other guidance

NHS complaints guidance

Discussion points

- Has a patient ever complained about your work? How has undertaking this process changed the way you care for your patients? How did you respond?

Disclaimer

These fictional case studies are for illustration purposes only and should not be relied on to make clinical decisions. Their aim is to put GDC guidance in context, exploring how some of the principles might work in practice.

The case studies cannot be relied on to be clinically accurate. Nor do the case studies intend to show the "correct" interpretation of GDC guidance, only one (or more) possible interpretation(s).