



Core subject: Handling Complaints

Avoid that face-off

Why 'thinking' resolution rather than 'complaint' can make all the difference.

Author: Alison Miles-Jenkins

CPD: 1 hour

Educational aims and objectives

The reader will learn the importance of focusing on resolution rather than complaint, when dealing with aggrieved patients.

Anticipated outcomes

The reader will have more skills to be able to handling patient complaints early and before they escalate.

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Avoid that face-off

Alison Miles-Jenkins explains why thinking 'resolution' rather than 'complaint' can make all the difference

'Do you know how many people I've referred to this practice in the past? Well, I'm certainly not happy now and I won't be referring anyone else, that's for sure. I want to make a complaint.'

Just reading those words is enough to unnerve many of us, isn't it? No-one likes criticism, let alone a complaint, and some of us may experience downright fear at an accusation of incompetence, poor service or a failure to meet patient expectations.

Unfortunately, fear is dangerous here, because, before we know it, the good old 'fight/flight' kicks in – that physiological response of ours when we are faced with a real or perceived threat. But, rather than help us survive in a complaint situation, it spurs us on to act defensively or aggressively, neither of which is going to help.

OWN WORST ENEMY?

When we behave in a defensive way towards others, we often let our emotions drive our behaviour. We defend our stance or 'attack' the other person verbally, often without realising how we are coming across. This is a potentially volatile situation because, chances are, the patient

An irony – and a gift

There's a chance to turn a complainant into the most loyal advocate for your practice. We know this because repurchase intention, a marketing concept, tells us that if someone complains – and you do your utmost to put it right – that person is more likely to use your service or product again, than if the complaint had not happened in the first place. Why? Because you have increased their trust in you exponentially. Ironic, isn't it, that that person may actually become one of your best champions? The complaint is a gift; it's free market research and it's a great opportunity to recheck what we do, how we do it, and whether we are overpromising and underdelivering. We may even need to adjust our marketing literature or work on our communication skills.



is already behaving in a similar way.

So, imagine the scene where both parties are 'firing on less than four cylinders of brain power' and are 'opening mouth and inserting foot'! We can very easily get sucked into this defend and attack spiral and it can get out of control very quickly. Some professionals can be so affronted and upset by a complaint, they stick their head in the sand, avoid it, tell no one and hope it will go away. It rarely does.

ESCALATION

Try to minimise the risk of escalation. The more it escalates, the harder the techniques are to sort the situation out, and you may have to get others involved, which takes time, and time is money. You must also consider:

- Reputational risk
- Brand damage
- The GDC standards for dental professionals
- The GDC principles of complaints handling
- The CQC
- Having a robust complaints policies and procedures in place
- The importance of contemporaneous notes, explanations of options, actions and risks.

A MAGIC WORD

There is one word that helps professionals make a paradigm shift in their attitude to complaints handling: RESOLUTION!

- It is a positive word
- It focuses on what you can do, rather than what you can't
- It is about looking forwards, rather than in the rear view mirror
- It is empowering, infers options and conclusions
- It's rational and reasoned, rather than emotionally driven.

I've seen this one word act like a magic wand to change the mindset of the member of staff.

When thinking about having attitude towards complaints I strongly believe it's also worth remembering this: when you receive a complaint or expression of dissatisfaction from a patient, it's normally a problem with expectation management. It's not about whether it's justified or not – if the patient says it is a complaint then clearly it is. It's not normally personal, but I know it feels like that at the time. **CPD**

AUTHOR



Alison Miles-Jenkins BA FCIPD is founder and CEO of Training To Achieve Enterprises. She has spent 28 years training more than 36,000 managers and professionals. She now specialises in working within dentistry and complaints handling,

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