ADEE ANNUAL MEETING LIVERPOOL 2023

COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION IN A DIGITAL ERA

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ADEE — ADVANCING EDUCATION AND ORAL HEALTH

POSTER: THEME Assessment and CPD

Views of dental professionals and the public about dentistry professionalism standards. Are they similar to other professions?

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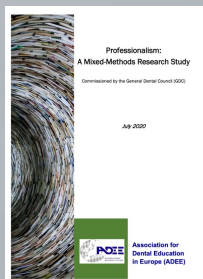
Background

The General Dental Council (GDC), the regulatory body in the UK, sets out nine principles of professional standards to which dental registrants must adhere. It has been argued that there is increased scrutiny of dental professionals as patients' expectations rise and concurrently a culture of litigation grows. This has led to discussions that the standards set are too high. A report commissioned by the GDC[1], explored what 'professionalism' means to dental professionals, patients, educators/researchers. This evidence supported the GDC's 'promoting professionalism' initiatives[2] This additional analysis looks in more depth at the wealth of information gathered as part of the report.

References

[1] https://www.gdc-uk.org/docs/default-source/research/professionalism---a-mixed-methods-research-study.pdfe
[2] https://www.gdc-uk.org/information-standards-guidance/standards-and-guidance/promoting-professionalism

Professionalism: A Mixed-Methods Research Study
Commissioned by the General Dental Council (GDC).
July 2020
Association for Dental Education in Europe (ADEE)

Standards justifiably high	Standards too high
Patient Trust * close contact compared * risk management	**Culture of Fear** * greater scrutiny to other professions
Comparison with other professions * in healthcare sector * influence of payment * in other sectors	**Perfection**

Fig 1.

Aims & Objectives

The aim of this study was to investigate the views of UK dental registrants (dentists and dental care professionals) and members of public's on whether these high standards, in dentistry, are justified. We explore the contentious issues surrounding professionalism in dentistry and draw on comparisons with the perceptions of professionalism standards in other professions. The objective being to identify a greater understanding of the issues from comments recorded as part of a wider Delphi survey.

'greater expectation placed on being able to be at the "top of your game" when undertaking irreversible procedures' **(Policy maker)**

'care needs to be taken to not create or even extend a culture of fear that is ultimately detrimental to patients. I have already seen young dentists avoiding even trying treatments under supervision for fear of the consequences if it goes wrong' **(Educator)**

'patients are unusually fearful of the dentist in comparison with other medical professionals, the onus of building trust is more profound' **(Dentist)**

Methods

Modified Online Delphi survey – boundaries of acceptable behaviour?
Statements
- Unprofessional (negative) behaviour
  - Rated 'highly', 'moderately' or 'not' unprofessional
- Professional (positive) behaviour
  - Rated 'essential', 'desirable', 'not necessary'
Two survey rounds – numeric analysis in GDC report[1]
Comments invited on the statements
Analysis of round one responses – 33,976 words of free-text data
Open-text responses transferred to Nvivo for pattern coding and thematic analysis.

'trust, confidence, behaviour etc should be the same whether the individual works in medical, veterinary, police, religion fields' **(dentist)**

Results

Analysis of 772 free-text responses on the behaviours - Unprofessional (312); Professional (216); other reflections on professionalism in dentistry (244); 13 codes identified
Professionalism perceptions fell into two categories; justifiably high; and too high. There were 4 themes and 7 sub themes (Fig. 1). Responses suggest the following:
- Similar standards to other healthcare professions mainly because of need for trust, close invasive irreversible procedures and high level of risk
- Higher level than other healthcare professions – financial implications and patients viewing themselves as consumers; higher earners thus higher expectations
- Higher standards expected compared with non-healthcare professions, but any profession that interacts with the public should adhere to high standards
- Greater scrutiny in dentistry – promoting culture of fear and defensive dentistry (due to fear of litigation)
- To meet the standards, dental professionals need to be 'robots', 'saints', perfect human beings.
- Promote a more positive spin on professionalism at all levels of education and training

'nature of the job we do & close contact we have with patients while operating in their mouths, I believe the standards of professionalism expected are higher [than other professions]' **(Dentist)**

'patients often see themselves as consumers, as opposed to receiving other healthcare…relationship between a GDP and patients very much differs to that of their GP' **(Dentist)**

''dental professionals should be held to a good standard of behaviour, but they should not be expected to be saintly at all times.' **(dentist)**

'no other profession requires the same combination of technical skill, clinical knowledge and clinical judgement in one individual' **(member of public)**

'the bar is set very high. We have been trained that nothing should ever go wrong in healthcare – this is not realistic' **(dentist)**

Discussion and Conclusions

Dental professionals and the public perceive that high standards in dentistry are expected. As a result, this should strengthen trust and reduce anxiety. However in dentistry, in contrast to other professions, these are some of the perceptions we collected from professionals and the public:
- There is pressure to be perfect and infallible as communication is essential and this can lead to avoiding difficult questions and treatment modalities that may lead to adverse reaction from patients.
- Increasing litigation promotes a culture of fear and the practice of defensive dentistry which can be contrary to appropriate patient centred care
- Mental health of small dental teams (dentist and nurse) working closely with their patients whilst undertaking intricate non-reversible procedures can be more adversely affected than in medicine where many staff work in large teams
- In the dental profession, where patient trust is paramount, high professionalism standards are justified similarly to other related professions. However, in contrast to other professions, dental professionals feel more pressurised to achieve an unattainable, infallible character, exacerbated by a growing culture of litigation. Such perceptions need addressing. We recommend that undergraduate and postgraduate educators strengthen their support for dental professionals by fostering a more positive, reflective, and supportive culture when approaching the issue of professionalism.