

Professionalism and Ethics

Note

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The authors, editor and publishers have, as far as is possible, taken care to confirm that the information complies with the latest standards of practice and legislation.

Professionalism and Ethics

A guide for dental care professionals

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UMD Professional Ltd



A division of MA Healthcare Ltd

Quay Books Division, MA Healthcare Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, London
SE24 0PB

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record is available for this book

© MA Healthcare Limited 2009

ISBN-10: 1 85642 381 6

ISBN-13: 978 1 85642 381 6

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Printed by CLE, St Ives, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire

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Preface

This book has come about as a result of a series of articles written for *Dental Nursing* and I am indebted to the Editor of that journal, Andrea Porter, not just for commissioning the series in the first place, but in so doing for opening a door for me to explore the fascinating and perplexing subject of professionalism.

This book is not intended as a definitive text on professionalism, if such a thing could even exist. Professionalism and our society's view of it are evolving concepts, and they will continue to evolve over the coming years as our view of healthcare, and the role and rights of the patient, change. Rather, this volume is a personal reflection on the nature of professionalism and how it relates to the profession of dental nursing. In some ways professionalism is in the eye of the beholder, and to an extent I have enjoyed since the late 1980s a privileged grandstand view as the story of dental nursing as a profession has been played out. My observations are those of the interested lay person wishing to be informed rather than the immersed professional needing to know. The intention of this book therefore is to challenge thought and stimulate debate on what I believe is an essential subject for all dental nurses to embrace – what it means to be a professional.

Many people have assisted in the writing of this book in many different ways but the practical assistance offered by Mike Grace and Penny Parry in particular should not go without mention.

I must also acknowledge the unwitting input of the many hundreds of dental nurses I have met over the last two decades, who have provided me with many insights into the nature of their work and professional relationships, and from whom I have learned so much.

Professionalism is a constant choice, and there are challenges ahead in dental nurses being accepted as professionals and also in understanding and upholding the GDC's Standards. However, few I hope would argue that dental nursing is a responsible, skilled and worthwhile occupation and that it is important to develop and maintain public confidence. 2008 represented a major shift in the status and standing of the dental nurse, and developing professionalism is, I believe, something that all dental nurses owe not just to their profession but also to themselves.

Fiona Stuart-Wilson
July 2009



Introduction

The date 31 July 2008 marked a turning point in the working lives of current and future dental nurses all over the UK. From that date, all individuals wishing to work as a dental nurse must either be enrolled on a recognised training programme or registered with the General Dental Council (GDC). Although this is now common knowledge, what might be less evident is what registration really means and what responsibilities the dental nurse takes on with registration. The registered dental nurse becomes a dental care professional. But what does this mean? And what does professionalism actually mean?

This book explores the idea of professionalism and its practical implications for the dental nurse. Professionalism, as we shall see, is not a cut and dried idea or concept, with clear-cut answers to tricky questions. Professionalism and ethics are closely allied, and professionalism also involves, amongst other things, exercising judgement.

Perhaps a good place to start is to answer the question 'How did we get to this point?'

The Dental Care Professional (DCP) registers actually opened on 31 July 2006, some 22 years after the BADN (or the Association of British Dental Surgery Assistants as it was then known) opened the Voluntary National Register (VNR) of dental nurses. That date saw the culmination of a protracted development and consultative process, involving different governments and an assortment of different organisations in dentistry, to reach agreement on the required legislation to allow registration.

Probably one of the most influential reports which helped to move registration forward was the Nuffield Report on the Education and Training of Personnel Auxiliary to Dentistry, published in 1993. At that time dental care professionals were termed auxiliaries; this report made recommendations to increase the range of the skills mix available to the dental team, with a dentist involving appropriately trained staff to increase efficiency and orientate services towards prevention. We have seen some of the effects of that report in the introduction of compulsory registration of dental nurses. Other factors which have had an impact on dental nurse registration could not perhaps have been foreseen; for example, the necessity of ensuring the safeguarding of patients highlighted in the various findings of the Shipman Inquiry is one such factor, but so too has been the further development of the dental nursing training curriculum.

The BADN published a response to the Nuffield Report in support of the Inquiry's proposal in 1994. Other dental organisations also published responses, but interestingly at that stage not all were in favour of dental nurse registration. The following year the GDC published its own consultation document, which heralded the beginning of the next stage.

1996 saw Dame Margaret Seward, then the President of the GDC, form the Dental Auxiliary Review Group (DARG), which brought together all interested organisations to discuss registration.

In 1998 DARG concluded that dental nurses should be registered with the GDC. The following year, the GDC made the formal decision in principle to register dental nurses and other Dental Care professional groups hitherto not registered, as part of a wider move to raise the standards of education and training of Dental Care Professionals (DCPs) through registration, but it was not until 2006 that the first dental nurse registered with the GDC.

You may ask why dental nurse registration took so long to come to fruition, and it is sobering to reflect on the number of changes that dental nursing has seen since 1993 whilst the thorny issue of registration has been debated. It is important to remember that the introduction of compulsory registration and, as we will see, the concomitant raising of the status of dental nurses, was not

A brief recent history of statutory registration

- **1993** Report of the Nuffield Inquiry into the 'Training and Education of Personnel Auxiliary to Dentistry' concludes that dental nurses should be registered with the GDC
- **1994** BADN publishes response to the Nuffield Report in support of the proposal – other dental organisations also publish responses, not all of them in favour of dental nurse registration
- **1995** GDC publishes consultation document
- **1996** BADN publishes response to GDC document, again supporting dental nurse registration
- **1996** Dame Margaret Seward, then President of the GDC, calls together all interested organisations to discuss registration and forms the Dental Auxiliary Review Group (DARG)
- **1998** DARG publishes its report and concludes, as Nuffield did five years earlier, that dental nurses should be registered with the GDC
- **1999** GDC makes formal decision to register dental nurses and other DCP groups
- **2002** First report of the Shipman Inquiry
- **2005** Final report of the Shipman Inquiry
- **2006** The first dental nurse registers with GDC