



Thank you, Joe the plumber!

John Chope reviews the GDC's annual report and wonders whether it has really helped the Council's message



Inside the GDC

Yesterday the GDC's 2007 annual report thumped onto my desk. Forty-two colourful pages packed with interesting performance figures and statistics. It has a folksy 'Joe the plumber' sort of theme with a gallery of cheerful and energetic ordinary working people saying how much they like their own dentist or DCP but asking how can they be certain that all dentists and DCPs are safe.

It's a mine of figures, covering the number of new registrants, new training courses and new complaints. The proportion of female dentists has increased to 40% and the number of dentists who qualified in the UK has decreased to 75%. Both trends are bound to continue because 53% of new dentists are now female and 60% are UK trained.

Nearly 1,000 registrants were the subject of complaints to the GDC Fitness to Practice procedures but after a total of 287 hearing days (16 days Investigating Committee, 16 days Health Committee and 255 days Interim Orders / Professional Conduct Committee) 117 registrants got an advice letter, 115 a warning letter of which 57 were published, 1 had practice conditions imposed, 10 were suspended and 14 erased.

But what was the

outstanding feature of the report? The date! Eleven months into 2008 and at a time of year when the twinkling lights of 2009 beckon on every high street corner, who, except an historian in an anorak, is interested in statistics relating to 2007? The delay is unfortunate because so much has happened since - many registrants would be hard pushed to discover its relevance to their current professional experience.

The report is sent by the GDC to 2000 chosen stakeholders and although the more than ninety one thousand registrants who now fund the Council are entitled to receive a copy, they will need to request it. The report can also be viewed on the GDC website.

Niall Dickson in his report on implementing the government white paper 'Trust, Assurance and Safety' draws

attention to the importance of keeping registrants personally and fully informed on performance and governance of their regulator, possibly by means of an abbreviated annual report. Perhaps the GDC should consider how it can account more promptly for the vast sums it receives from its registrants.

Apparently, one of the reasons given for the belated report is that Council is not asked to approve the accounts until early June. However, such a lame excuse would cut thin ice in the governance regimes of the corporate sector and the stock-market would place little value on an annual report that was almost a year old.

So, like 'Joe the plumber,' the character may be colourful, the wisdom homespun, the figures fascinating and the sound-bites catchy, but has it helped the GDC with its message? I wonder.

Blue ribbons flag up Mouth Cancer Week

A dental charity is offering free Mouth Cancer Action Week appeal kits to all.

As the UK gears up for November's Action Week, the British Dental Health Foundation (BDHF) is urging dental practices, doctor's surgeries, health centres hospitals and pharmacies to claim their free kit before the campaign kicks off (16-22 November).

The week-long focus on mouth cancer - a disease that kills one person every five hours in the UK - is a call for action after four previous Awareness Weeks organised by the Foundation.

Blue Ribbon Badges are an important tool for helping raise awareness of the disease and its dangers amongst your patients.

BDHF chief executive Dr Nigel Carter, said: 'Action can be as simple as setting up a Blue Ribbon Badge Appeal kit on your premises, or taking a few

moments to discuss mouth cancer with patients.

'The kit is free, and by distributing badges we can help raise public consciousness of the disease. Five thousand people are diagnosed each year in the UK, and mouth cancer causes more deaths than both cervical cancer and testicular cancer combined. Yet one in five people remain unaware of the disease.

'It is up to all of us as health professionals to act on the frontline against this killer, and ordering a kit can be jus the start.'

Blue Ribbon Badge Kits include a free collection box and badges that carry a suggested donation value of £1 each.

To order your free kit, phone the Foundation on 0870 770 4000, email pr@dentalhealth.org or visit www.mouthcancer.org.



A problem with Stephanie

By Caroline Holland

Stephanie is a 57-year-old nurse receptionist and she is causing trouble. She is negative, rude, often takes time off sick and is causing good staff to leave. If you don't think she is your problem, think again. Most practices at some point will employ a Stephanie or a Stephen and not only should you be equipped to deal with her/him, you need to be sure of your legal position. It could be a Stephanie who decides to see you at an employment tribunal.

Managing difficult people and good ones too is a one-day seminar that was born when business consultant Sheila Scott and specialist employment lawyer Hayley Bloodworth decided that a combined training course could help dental practices avoid legal action and, furthermore, that by implementing a proactive managerial approach, prevent difficulties occurring. They offer, if you like, risk management strategies for employers.

Their latest workshop was held at the British Dental Association some weeks ago. As usual, it attracted a mix of dentists and managers who shared their stories and concerns with each other as they learned how to implement better systems in their practices. Some of the situations

described by delegates beggared belief - the dentist who called his staff by their job title and not by their name, the epileptic receptionist who concealed her disability at interview and then refused to give up her 'front-of-house' role, the practice manager who stole hundreds of pounds every week over the course of a year, the team member who was seen shopping while off sick.

But first there was Stephanie. She was the subject of the initial training exercise and we had to decide how to deal with her. Interestingly, the dentists in the group were ready to sack her instantly, partly because she was still on probation. Not so the managers who were keen to work out what was going on. One delegate suggested that after she had been off sick Stephanie should be given a 'welcome-back-to-work' interview.

This, according to lawyer Hayley Bloodworth, is the right thing to do. Be friendly and informal, she advised, and ask the staff member how they are and if they are feeling better. It's much harder to take time off illicitly if you know you will have to look someone in the eyes on your return to work.

Hayley pointed out that Stephanie could really have

been ill and if she had been criticised for taking time off, the practice would find itself on the wrong end of a legal action. In the first probationary year there are still many possible grounds for a new recruit to issue legal proceedings.

There are apparently more than 100,000 tribunal claims every year in the UK and the majority are for unfair dismissal. But who wants to plan for difficulties? Not Hayley and Sheila, who encouraged delegates to recognise the influence they can bring to bear on team members and provided them with the skills to support the new approach. For instance, every opportunity should be taken to outline performance expectations, said Hayley. Not only is this good practice, but when standards slip, you can remind colleagues of what they agreed to. The concept of acting reasonably is what every employer should strive towards, we learned. It might feel like the employer has all the responsibility and the employee has all the protection but delegates are equipped during the day to start handing responsibility to employees.

The skill that can do most to defuse potentially difficult situations is constructive feedback. You identify the specific problem and then involve the other person in finding a

solution, so they take ownership. Sheila advised: 'Let your attitude be curious and helpful - focus on the facts, ask the person why this is happening and what can they do to solve the problem.' Very often, explained Sheila, employers and managers avoid confronting colleagues because they are afraid of a negative reaction. Constructive feedback takes the sting out of an emotional response. It must be delivered continually, whether positive or negative, so those around know the impact they are having.

By the end of the day, delegates had set out their own aims for their personal and professional lives, defined their expectations of their staff or colleagues, learned about different types of employment contract and appraisal systems, been taught about the risks they face if their employment procedures are not rigorous, and they understood how to deal with difficult people.

As for Stephanie, she is going back to work soon and, due to the encouragement she had to sort out her health problems, is very grateful to her employer and working harder than ever. Well, that's the theory, and having understood and mastered the supporting skills, delegates left determined to turn around the Stephanies and Stephens in their lives.

Top award for Vinod Joshi



Vinod Joshi (right) receives the award from Chris Nutting

A doctor who says he has a 'mission to raise awareness of mouth cancer' has won a top award in recognition of his work.

Dr Vinod Joshi - founder of the UK's leading mouth cancer charity, the Mouth Cancer Foundation - earned it for Best Patient Support Initiative at the Pfizer Oncology Awards.

Dr Chris Nutting, President of the British Oncological Association, presented him with his award and a £1,500 research grant.

Dr Joshi achieved outstanding success through the restorative dentistry oncology clinic initiative to create a patient website and patient support charity.

In January 2002, he launched the UK website to

cater for the unmet needs of his patients and similar patients across the nation, focusing on mouth cancer awareness, early detection and patient information and support.

The unique feature of the members' forum and message board added in 2003 enables patients and carers to offer each other support, advice and encouragement.

The Pfizer Oncology Awards are designed to recognise and reward teams as well as individuals who stand out from their peers - whatever their speciality, level of expertise or position.

Dr Nutting said: 'As President of the BOA, I am delighted to have chaired the awards again this year. It has been a genuine pleasure for me to review this year's entries. They have all demonstrated a wide range of impressive achievements in oncology care.'

BOA provides a multidisciplinary forum for the presentation and discussion of cancer research and development.

Dr Joshi said: 'Being awarded this award means so much. Mouth cancer is such a wicked, cruel disease and its treatment is debilitating. Unfortunately, many people have not heard of mouth cancer and so neglect the early signs; it is my mission to raise awareness of this disease.'



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