

# Risk Management in Clinical Practice

PEAK (Practice Enhancement and Knowledge) is a College service for members, whose goal is to regularly provide Ontario dentists with copies of key articles on a wide range of clinical and non-clinical topics from the dental literature around the world.

It is important to note that PEAK articles may contain opinions, views or statements that are not necessarily endorsed by the College. However, PEAK is committed to providing quality material to enhance the knowledge and skills of member dentists.

For years, the College's Professional Liability Program (PLP) has offered guidance to members about preventing malpractice claims or complaints, and lessening their magnitude when they occur.

Through the Ounce of Prevention articles in Dispatch, PLP continues to provide advice on a wide-range of topics, such as promoting excellent communications with patients, keeping complete dental records, maintaining high professional standards, ensuring informed consent to treatment is obtained, recognizing your own limitations and referring patients when necessary. In summary, PLP encourages members to exercise risk management and these topics are the cornerstones of this concept.

Risk can be defined as uncertainty of outcome. All clinical dental procedures come with some risks, and the goals of risk management are to recognize problems before they happen and deal with them when they do. Risk management covers all the processes involved in identifying, assessing and judging risks, taking actions to mitigate or anticipate them, and monitoring and reviewing progress.

Risk management is not new to dentistry or other health care professions, and is not peculiar to Ontario or even Canada. Worldwide, all health care professionals must deal with risks and manage their patients' exposure to them.

With the current issue of Dispatch, PEAK is pleased to offer members the following article: "Risk management in clinical practice. Part 1. Introduction", from the July 10, 2010 issue of the British Dental Journal. This article is the first of a 12-part series on the subject of risk management, published by the British Dental Journal.

The article examines the factors that trigger claims and complaints by patients, and the importance of good dental records to successfully defend against them. The article goes on to describe the principles of risk management, with an emphasis on learning from our mistakes.

## KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Not every dissatisfied patient complains. It is when precipitating factors are overlaid with predisposing factors that patients can direct the blame at a series of individuals and a complaint crystallizes.
- Communication skills have a significant influence on a patient's satisfaction level towards outcomes of treatment. Failure in communication has been identified as the predominant factor in 80 per cent of patient complaints and litigation.
- Patient expectations need to be modified and made realistic by information provided by the dentist, especially when elective treatment is planned. When the divide between the patient's expectations and what can actually be achieved is reduced or eradicated, the unmet expectations will be reduced and consequently so will the cause of many complaints.
- Good dental records are essential to the delivery of good dental care and the successful defense of a claim or complaint. The lack of supportive information in the dental records undermines the dentist's legal position, even when the treatment provided has been of a high standard. Spending 30 seconds more on making a pertinent contemporaneous entry about a conversation, warning, option or piece of advice can provide the perfect antidote to the patient's selective memory of the occasion.
- When embarking on elective treatment for teeth that are healthy and symptom-free, good dental records are indispensable. The more elective the treatment, the more intrusive/interventionist/irreversible the treatment, the greater the risks of an adverse outcome or the consequences if this were to happen, then the more critical it becomes to have full and meticulous records available.
- A dentist has a duty to refer patients for a second opinion and further advice when it is necessary or if the patient asks.
- A professional recognizes his/her limitations. These may be based on the realization that a particular patient's needs cannot be met, either because of the complexity of the treatment or the demands of the patient. There is a balance between accepting a challenging case over which you have a high degree of control and foolishly taking on a case either for financial reward or because of undue pressures placed on you by the patient or other parties.
- The mark of a professional is to acknowledge when things go wrong, communicate this to patients with humility and learn from the problem to ensure that, where possible, it does not occur again.

COLLEGE CONTACT **Dr. Michael Gardner** – Manager, Quality Assurance  
 416-934-5611 1-800-565-4591  
 mgardner@rcdso.org