

# Effects of client complaints

Client complaints can be a cause of stress and anxiety, and the ripples from a complaint can spread beyond the individual at the centre to families and practice colleagues.

Helen Beban, Professional Adviser with the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ), says we can learn from the experience of the dental profession.

**THE IMPETUS FOR** this article was a paper in the *New Zealand Dental Journal*<sup>1</sup> on the impact of patient complaints on New Zealand dentists, and to consider correlations with the veterinary profession. Data about New Zealand professional groups is scarce due to their small size and resource limitations, compared with those overseas. The dental profession (2,635)<sup>1</sup> is a similar size to the veterinary profession (2,802)<sup>2</sup> in New Zealand. This paper gives a valuable opportunity for reflection on how the findings may relate to the veterinary profession and the opportunity to learn from them.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A qualitative research method was used. Nine dentists who had experienced complaints volunteered to be part of the study. Each undertook a 60–90 minute recorded face-to-face interview with one of the co-authors. Interviews were transcribed and then subjected to line-by-line thematic analysis.

The aim was to explore the respondents' initial and ongoing responses to the complaint, how it had affected their families and colleagues and how it had affected their professional practice and lessons from the experience.

## STUDY THEMES

### 1. Stress of receiving a complaint on the professional, their family and colleagues

This response was reported by all the respondents, even though only one of the complaints was upheld (two were unresolved when the interviews were conducted). The experience took a long-term toll on the emotional health and

confidence of some respondents. Fear of loss of income was reported by some, especially if they were their family's sole income earner.

### 2. Dealing with difficult behaviours of the client and the client's family

Several respondents commented on the ongoing verbal abuse they and their colleagues were subjected to.

### 3. The complaints process

Many of the respondents commented that they felt they had little understanding of and control over the complaints process. Several expressed concern over the timeliness of the process, especially the formal complaints process.

Some respondents felt that there was a lack of satisfactory resolution and the process had interfered with the opportunity to resolve the issue with the client.

Several noted that comments made by other professionals may have created or inflamed the complaint.

### 4. Ability to resolve issues with the client in terms of financial remedies

Some respondents felt that they were hampered in their ability to achieve a resolution by refunding the client due to the complaints process or lack of control over the business.

### 5. Sources of support

Most respondents had accessed support from Dental Protection Limited, the dental equivalent of the Veterinary Professional Indemnity Society, and found that support valuable.

Having someone who understands the situation to talk to was an important aspect of support for those going through a complaint process.

### 6. Changes to the way the professionals practised after a complaint

The respondents reported that, apart from being more aware of record-keeping and of informing patients about what they were doing, there were no major changes to the way they practised dentistry as a result of the complaint.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study showed that the "impact of receiving a complaint on the person of the dentist is significant and injurious".<sup>1</sup> The authors conclude that dentists in receipt of a complaint need ongoing support, not only in a legal sense but also to help with personal stress, prolonged anxiety and a feeling of helplessness.

Of concern is the lack of positive impact of a complaint on the ongoing competency of these professionals. There was no indication that the process resulted in learning and change.

The authors recommend that it is the whole dental profession's responsibility to provide this support and mentoring. They cite an article in the *British Dental Journal*,<sup>3</sup> which echoes the findings in this paper: "It behoves us as a profession to accept that complaints are an essential part of improving the quality of care we deliver but we should also be acutely aware of the impact these complaints have on the individuals who are the subject of these complaints, whether justified or not, and to provide the pastoral care to support them and prevent any long-term emotional or health consequences as a result."

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*VCNZ update – continued*

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VETERINARY PROFESSION**

In the next issue of *Vetscript*, I will draw on the results of this study of complaints against New Zealand dentists, and the feedback received from veterinarians in the recent VCNZ survey, to discuss the situation in the veterinary profession in New Zealand. ▼

### **REFERENCES**

1. Stuart, T and W Cunningham (2015) The impact of patient's complaints on New Zealand dentists. *New Zealand Dental Journal* 111(1): 25–29.
2. Veterinary Council of New Zealand data (practising veterinarians 30 June 2015).
3. D'Cruz, L (2009) Who cares for the carers? *British Dental Journal* 207(1): 11–12.