Dentist’s fear and clinical decision making
The evidence summary is based on the original summary published in the BDJ\(^{(1)}\) (August 2010). It aims to use research evidence to construct a comprehensive list of the fears of primary care dentists and to identify how dentists’ fears impact on their clinical decision-making. It does not include detailed descriptions of the studies cited nor does it include information that was not presented in the literature. This topic was the subject of a £77,357 research grant awarded in 2011.

The Curious about website encourages dental professionals to raise issues where a review of the available evidence would provide a useful resource for other dental professionals. Where there is a lack of evidence, the topic is considered for research and an award is made available.

These activities are sponsored by the Shirley Glasstone Hughes Fund, a restricted fund within the BDA Trust Fund. The focus of the fund is research into primary care dentistry and aims to generate a body of relevant research for practicing dentists.
Key finding

- No studies identified the nature and extent of dentists' fears or assessed how dentists' own fears impact upon clinical decision-making.

Review question

This evidence summary was prepared in response to the following question: does dentists' fear have an adverse effect on clinical decision-making.

Key terms

Fear
An unpleasant feeling of anxiety or apprehension caused by the presence or anticipation of danger; worry about something that threatens to bring bad news or results; likelihood of an undesirable thing happening.

Clinical decision-making
The process of making decisions by clinicians, usually in relation to the diagnosis or treatment of individual patients.

Adverse effect
A harmful or abnormal result.

Defensive clinical practice
The alteration of modes of clinical practice, induced by the threat of liability.

The case for action

Patient fear of dental treatment and the options a dentist has for managing it are popular literature topics. Fear also affects clinicians with sixty-one per cent of dentists (n = 62) feeling fear affects their clinical decision making on a daily basis. Informally a diverse range of fears have been reported (Figure 1).

Emotions, including fear, are able to alter judgement and can turn a decision into an ethical or unreasonable one. Fear can skew behaviour and decisions away from best practice and towards less optimal but personally less fearful solutions that may result in sub-optimal care or the sacrifice of basic principles such as beneficence and non-maleficence. On the other hand fear could aid learning and stimulate performance.

Though medical technology is advancing providing medical care for individual patients is becoming more complex due to factors such as the structure of the health service and patient expectations and this may increase the influence factors such as fear have over clinical decisions.

The evidence

No studies identified the nature and extent of dentists' fears. Nor did any study assess how dentists' own fears impact upon clinical decision-making.
Methods

Search strategy
The following resources were searched:

- Ovid MEDLINE
- Centre for Evidence Based Dentistry
- Cochrane Oral Health Group
- Centre for Reviews and Dissemination
- American Dental Association
- TRIP
- Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects
- NHS Evidence – QIPP
- Social sciences databases (Science Direct, ASSIA (CSA), Web of Science, EBSCO, SwetsWise)

Search terms for Ovid MEDLINE were: fear, decision making, clinical competence, patient care planning, choice, and behaviour.

Individual journal searches included Evidence- Based Dentistry, Journal of Evidence- Based Dental Practice, and Journal of the American Dental Association.

Searches are current as of April 2010.

Results
No relevant studies were found.

Consequences of clinical decisions
Insufficient knowledge/skills
Cost to dentist/dental practice

Micro-management in practice
Litigation
Being sacked/struck off

Running late
Cost to patients
Of continuous performance improvement

Figure 1 Fears reported by dentists in a 2010 GDPUK online survey

References

5. The role of fear in clinical decision-making. GDPUK online survey. http://www.gdpuk.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4881 (private access website,
accessed May 2010).
7. Schattner A. Angst-driven Medicine? *QJM* 2009; **102**: 75-8