

Caroline Lappin
Chief Dental Officer
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
BT4 3SQ

7th May 2025

Re. Dental Tourism: Practitioner obligations & safeguards

Dear Caroline

At its meeting on 28th March, NI Council considered that issuing of guidance from the Department at this time could be helpful to assist practitioners navigate with more certainty increasing challenges presented from the growth of dental tourism, in particular patients who opt to receive private treatment elsewhere.

Practitioners report a lack of clarity in where the limits of their obligations lie, particularly when increasingly being presented with patients at practice after having received private care overseas.

Clearly, there are a range of obligations which practitioners need to consider, not least their professional obligations as determined by GDC, as well as professional indemnity considerations. However, for the purposes of this correspondence, there is a lack of clarity among practitioners regarding the extent to which they are required to provide care, and limits of type of care to be provided according to their contractual obligations -within GDS, but also in all settings where such patients may present.

This extends to the circumstances in which it may be appropriate to de-register patients, for instance on the breakdown of the dentist/patient relationship.

For our part, you will be aware BDA has sought to have this information gap addressed in a number of ways. The latest BDJ in Practice (Volume 38, Issue 4 April 2025) is a themed edition dedicated to Dental Tourism featuring contributions from a wide range of perspectives including GDC, oCDO in England on 'Avoidance of doubt' guidelines, BDA Indemnity and beyond.

In addition, our Head of BDA Indemnity Len D'Cruz addressed some aspects of the practitioner response to these issues in his presentation on the theme, 'Consent, Complications & record-keeping' at a BDA NI Branch CPD event on 29th April.

While we have sought to disseminate a range of information to the profession, we would like to work with you on helpful guidance, including practical parameters which could be disseminated to the profession in Northern Ireland to help guide and provide greater reassurance as to how patients can be managed compassionately in discharging obligations, while at the same time ensuring practitioners are safeguarded.

Demand for additional clarity among practitioners to help navigate these issues is apparent, and has emerged at LDC and in the recent non-contract meeting. This is perhaps not surprising since we have not yet had an equivalent 'Avoidance of Doubt' publication locally.

Consideration should also be given to what Health Service care is available for patients who have undergone private treatment overseas; where the boundaries may lie between our equivalent of 'assessment and stabilisation', and the limitations of any remedial treatment which may be provided, as well as relevant factors such as limitations of practitioner competencies.

Alongside providing practitioners with 'practical parameters' guidance, it may also be appropriate for DoH/SPPG to identify a pathway for these patients presenting with such complex conditions to be referred to.

In addition, addressing the circumstances in which core elements of trust and confidence -vital to a professional relationship between patient and dentist may be considered to be broken -such as in cases where care is received elsewhere against the advice of a dentist would also be considered helpful.

We look forward to engaging with you on these issues in the near future.

Yours sincerely



Paul Brennan
Chair, Northern Ireland Council
Cc: Laura Bamford, GDC

Appendix:

a. Contractual obligations

General Dental Services Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993:

NHS contractual obligation - *'secure and maintain the patient's oral health'*.

Oral health is defined as: ...*'such a standard of health of the teeth, their supporting structures and other tissues of the mouth, and of dental efficiency, as in the case of any patient having regard to the need to safeguard his (or her) general health'*.

b. Professional obligations

GDC Standard for the Dental Team 1.4.2

You must provide patients with treatment that is their best interests, providing appropriate oral health advice and following clinical guidelines relevant to their situation. You may need to balance their oral health needs with their desired outcomes.

1.2.4 You should manage patients dental pain and anxiety appropriately.

7.2.1 You must only carry out a task or type of treatment if you are appropriately trained, competent, confident and indemnified.

7.2.2 If you are not confident to provide treatment, you must refer the patient to an appropriately trained colleague.