

Are we really professional?

Sim Goldblum questions the meaning of the term.

Last month, I spent some time talking about the practice's hourly rate and its importance in helping you to know the value of your own time and work. This was to help you establish the pricing of your services to your patients, at a level that is necessary for you to make the profits you wish to earn.

The concept of the hourly rate is



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used by professionals all over the world; solicitors and barristers, accountants and private medical consultants all use this method for billing their clients. They do not use it however, for paying their staff because professionals are paid salaries and not by the hour.

I'd like to reflect on this issue for a moment because during some work we were doing recently for some clients we were frankly astounded to find members of staff were being paid by the hour and their pay was being reduced if they were absent. At the same time, some dentists appear to be taking advantage of the need for nurses to undergo more training in order to maintain their registration, by reducing their pay for time out of the surgery on training courses.

We hear a great deal about dentistry being a profession, that the running of a practice is a team sport and that all staff in the practice are working together to achieve a common goal; often it would appear that goal is just the profits made by the owner of the practice.

So what is a profession? The Oxford English Dictionary describes a profession as 'an occupation that involves training and a formal qualification'. This clearly applies not only to the dentist but to hygienists,

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therapists, and dental nurses, who not only have to pass exams but must register with the General Dental Council in order to practise. That same dictionary describes a professional as, 'someone who is very skilled in a particular activity'. Yet in this professional world of dentistry, our skilled and experienced staff have their pay reduced if they have to take time out to look after a sick child, or a parent, or engage in a training course to improve not only their own performance, but by definition the effectiveness of the practice of which they are a team player.

Of course, there was a time when dentistry was a piecework profession the dentist getting paid only for the work that they did, the more you drilled and filled, the more you got paid. Now, NHS dentists receive a fixed amount of money spread monthly over the year; this gets paid whether they produce the contracted output or not; the final reckoning is only done at the end of the year. In the private sector, while fee per item still plays a part, the majority of private income comes from patients' monthly payments to private plans; again the dentist receives the income whatever the work done.

A few weeks ago, a client told us they had to shut the practice because no patients were coming in the ➔

☞ afternoon because of the snow. The staff had no choice but to do as the dentist required, but should they have had their pay stopped for the afternoon? The dentist got paid through his monthly contract value.

Finally, a few words about practice managers and receptionists who at the moment are not required to register with the GDC. Your receptionist is the best salesperson in your team, the critical first interface with a patient, resourceful, flexible and knowledgeable, and so often the person to whom the patient turns when they haven't understood the treatment you have proposed or even the work that you've done.

To manage is to be in charge of people, to control the use of money, time or other resources and the manager is the person in charge of the business affairs of the

practice. How often is the practice manager the person who manages absenteeism, staff shortages and precious little else? The practice manager has become a vital part of the effective operation of a successful practice, whether NHS, mixed or wholly private. They too benefit from education and training and need to be able to apply for

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training programmes, preferably accredited, without the fear of losing their hourly pay. Principals should remember this Government actively supports training, and funding is often available for either the course itself or to contribute to salaries that must still be paid when

the team is absent being trained.

You may gather a sense of outrage at this behaviour, which is not common to all practices, but seems to happen enough to make it worth talking about. This profession must move into the 21st century; it must value every member of the team at whatever level they operate. Without all of the team working at peak effectiveness and for each other, no practice can deliver the goals we all seek: excellent patient services; a great place to come to work every day; and shared rewards that meet everyone's expectations and needs. ■

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