

# The clinical environment

## Part 1

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## The clinical environment

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Entering the clinical environment as a healthcare professional should be a stimulating and rewarding experience. There is no doubt that it also requires a significant amount of preparation and training. It is a privilege that comes with a number of important obligations; you will carry out your own professional responsibilities as well as being responsible for engaging with, and often managing, the wider dental team.

## Regulation

The way in which you work within the clinical environment will be governed by several regulatory bodies – their aim is to ensure optimal safety and patient care. It is your responsibility to make sure that you are adequately trained and competent in order to treat patients – this is known as ‘fitness to practise’. The General Dental Council is the senior body that regulates dental professionals in the United Kingdom. However, other organisations such as academic institutions and statutory bodies will also take a career-long interest in your fitness to practise as you move through your training and into the workplace.

No doubt it is difficult enough to learn the basic skills necessary in order to treat patients operatively, but in isolation these skills are not enough to ensure the care and well-being of your patient base, or the efficiency and harmony of the dental team. When all is considered, the clinical environment has the potential to be complex and diverse. It is at this stage of your educational career when you must make sure that you are sufficiently organised and prepared to maximise the learning experience and drive your own learning. This may seem like a frustrating distraction for some people, but it will form a sound basis for lifelong learning and continued professional development.

Figure 1.1 outlines some of the important components and regulatory bodies with which you will need to engage in order to make an appropriate transition to clinical dentistry.

At the present time, the General Dental Council document ‘Standards for the Dental Team’ outlines nine principles that should underpin your practice, including:

- Putting patients’ interests first
- Communicating effectively with patients
- Obtaining valid consent
- Maintaining and protecting patients’ information
- Working with colleagues in a way that is in patients’ best interests
- Maintaining, developing and working within your professional knowledge and skills
- Raising concerns if patients are at risk
- Making sure your personal behaviour maintains patients’ confidence in you and the dental profession

You will also be expected to engage with clinical governance. This concept was introduced by the National Health Service in order to promote high standards of care, transparency, accountability and continual improvement in the delivery of care. The elements of clinical governance are often referred to as the ‘seven pillars’:

- Education and training
- Clinical audit
- Clinical effectiveness
- Research and development
- Openness
- Risk management
- Information management

Arguably, one of the most important elements of early professional development is adopting an appropriate attitude towards patient care and the dental team. Part of this is about how you

appear to your patients and the wider public in terms of your behaviour, your appearance and how you communicate. As a student you are expected to make full use of your learning environment, which includes attending all the lectures, practicals and seminars that your institution provides for you. You are also expected to be punctual and to inform relevant individuals about planned or unplanned absences.

As a registered dental care professional, you will be expected to lead and manage at least part of the dental team. Aside from the above requirements, there will undoubtedly be a number of local guidelines, rules and regulations to adhere to; you should lead by example in this respect.

## Personal protective equipment

For your own safety you will be required to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) in the form of eye protection, face mask and gloves. This also helps to convey an image of professionalism to the patient and the wider team within which you work. Safety glasses must be worn while using any cutting or rotary instruments, and while dispensing materials. Gloves should be used while in contact with the patient and their immediate environment, while handling clinical materials and when cleaning or disposing of dirty instruments. Face masks should be worn over the mouth *and* nose while using rotary instruments and working operatively on the patient. Your employer should provide reusable items of PPE, but within an academic institution you may be required to provide your own. Safety glasses should conform to safety standard EN166B/EN166A.

## Uniforms and appearance

It is nearly always a requirement to conform to a dress code or uniform and appearance policy while working in a clinical environment. The main purpose of such a policy is to reinforce a professional image and to act as a barrier for personal protection and cross-infection control. Many policies stipulate a ‘bare below the elbow’ requirement; if you are in any doubt about what you can or cannot wear, then you must seek guidance from a senior clinical colleague, or obtain a copy of the policy yourself. It is also inappropriate to wear clinical attire outside of the clinical environment. You may be required to wash and maintain your own uniform.

In terms of your appearance, hair should be neat and tidy, secured from the face and lifted if longer than shoulder length. This is primarily to ensure your safety during clinical and laboratory procedures. Some policies will also stipulate requirements for the removal of jewellery. When considering hair colour and tattoos, please consider the patient base and dental team with which you are interacting in order to avoid causing any offence.

## Dental loupes

Finally, many students ask me whether they should obtain their own set of dental loupes at this stage. I would recommend trying without these initially; basic dental procedures should not require any magnification and evidence suggests that there is no improvement in the operative performance of dental students. Loupes can, however, improve your posture, as they require you to work within a prescribed ‘working distance’. If you decide to go ahead, it is critical that you obtain an appropriate prescription and that you have the opportunity to try the loupes before you buy them. There are many systems available, including through-the-lens, flip-up lens and illuminated loupes; each offers its own advantages. Higher magnification is not always better, and the field of view is an important consideration.