

EDITORIAL

Important changes still needed at GDC

Eddie Crouch

Chair of the BDA Principal Executive Committee, London, UK

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The General Dental Council (GDC) recently announced the appointment of Tom Whiting as its new Chief Executive Officer and Registrar. I offer Tom my best wishes and look forward to meeting him soon.

The operational management and leadership of a £40m organisation with 400 staff is a big job and it goes without saying that Tom's taking on a challenging role at the GDC. Even more so given the struggles faced by the GDC in supporting its key functions. The Council's own organisational performance annual report for 2023 sets out starkly the challenges faced in terms of turnover and ongoing vacancies, meaning an inexperienced staff impacting on activity. Those of us used to working in practice understand how staffing shortages can affect delivery but sympathies will only extend so far. If the GDC was operating in NHS dentistry in England, it would no doubt be facing end-of-year clawback and potential breach notices.

Besides those operational responsibilities, the GDC's senior executive team is also at the forefront of the Council's stakeholder management and interaction with the profession. It has often struck me how much of this work is done by the GDC staff team, and conversely how little by Council members themselves. Lord Toby Harris as Chair has been much more visible (and indeed approachable) than his predecessor, probably for good reason. But most of the GDC's engagement work comes from its staff. Of course, with self-regulation a distant memory, Council members aren't there to act as representatives of the profession, but I do wonder if we ought to see more of them as the public face of the GDC, taking responsibility for its actions and decisions.

Tom Whiting joins the GDC from the Independent Office for Police Conduct

(IOPC), which is the police complaints watchdog for England and Wales. The IOPC sets the standards by which the police should handle complaints and emphasises a focus on investigating only the most serious complaints and conduct matters involving the police. Let's hope for a similar emphasis in the GDC's handling of fitness to practise (FtP) matters. We all want to see low-level and vexatious complaints weeded out of the system as early as possible.

In this edition of the *BDJ*, my BDA Board colleague Laura Cross sets out the wide range of policy and practical issues



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that we continue to raise with the GDC on behalf of the profession.¹ It is a long list and the GDC's approach to FtP is prominent in Laura's description of our engagement with them.

She highlights the impact of the Lucy Williams case which centred around 'topping up' fees to NHS patients. That FtP case raised important questions around legal interpretations of the NHS contract in England. It is frustrating, indeed unacceptable, that those issues of interpretation remain unresolved a year on. The profession deserves better than this from NHS England, particularly as effectively we paid for those legal arguments to be heard. Having had the opportunity to discuss that case with those most closely involved, I have also been struck by the heavy personal impact exerted by FtP processes and how there is

still an awful lot of room for improvement in how these cases are handled.

It is high-profile cases like Lucy Williams' that will continue to set the narrative and perceptions around the regulator. In our digital age, awareness spreads and I noted how quickly a recent GDC 'charge sheet' made its way across social media, outlining allegations which, on the face of it, really didn't appear to reach the threshold required to warrant a misconduct charge.

Our expert BDA Indemnity team, led by Len D'Cruz, quite rightly likes to emphasise to colleagues that the vast majority of us have absolutely nothing to fear from the

GDC, that any interactions are likely to be limited and get nowhere near a formal hearing. That is a particularly important message to our colleagues starting off their careers. But it's also a message that gets undermined if we continue to see individual cases that just don't feel as if they have been handled effectively or sympathetically.

We'll keep making these points on your behalf and look forward to continuing the conversation with Tom Whiting and colleagues up the road in Wimpole Street. There are important changes and improvements to make at the GDC, and the BDA will continue to push strongly for these. ■

References

1. Cross L. The dental profession expects high standards from its regulator. *Br Dent J* 2024; **236**: 590–591.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-024-7353-4>