

Dental complaints in a generational context: From reception desk to keyboard

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Introduction

As patient expectations shift and communication becomes increasingly digital, the way dental complaints arise – and how they are expressed is changing too. For practices trying to deliver safe, person-focused care, it's no longer enough to understand what patients complain about. The real insight comes from understanding how and why they do it. From working across a range of practices, one thing is consistently clear: complaints rarely come out of nowhere. They tend to build quietly, rooted in small, everyday system issues – subtle 'red flags' that sit unnoticed until something triggers them.

At the same time, generational differences are playing a growing role in how dissatisfaction is voiced. This is something many practices are feeling, particularly with the rise in online reviews appearing without any prior warning.

Complaints are usually the end of a story, not the beginning

There's often an assumption that a complaint is caused by a single event – a failed treatment, a mistake or a difficult interaction. In reality, it's rarely that simple.

More often, complaints are the result of a series of smaller issues such as:

- Unclear explanations around treatment options
- Confusion about costs or payment expectations
- Inconsistent communication between team members
- Missed opportunities to pick up on patient concerns early.

Individually, these don't always seem significant. But over time, they stack up. By the time a patient complains, the frustration has usually been building for a while.

Guidance from organisations like the General Dental Council (GDC) and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) is clear – patients should feel informed, listened to and treated with openness. The challenge is making sure that those principles are actually

lived out day to day, not just written in policies.

Different generations, different approaches

One of the more noticeable shifts in recent years is how different age groups choose to complain.

Older patients (Baby Boomers and Generation X)

Generally speaking, older patients are more likely to raise concerns directly:

- They'll mention something at reception or speak to a clinician
- They're more comfortable having a conversation, even if it's awkward
- They often expect the practice to put things right before going any further.

If they do escalate a complaint, they're more likely to follow a formal route – either through the practice's complaints procedure, the NHS, or private dental complaint services.

There's often an underlying expectation of relationship and trust. Many in this group

still value continuity of care and long-term relationships with their oral healthcare team.

Younger patients (Millennials and Generation Z)

With younger patients, the pattern is noticeably different:

- They are far more likely to leave an online review as their first step
- They may avoid raising issues face-to-face altogether
- They expect quick responses and clear communication
- They rely heavily on other people's reviews when choosing a practice.

What this means in practice is that dissatisfaction can go completely under the radar until it suddenly appears online. That's the first indication that something wasn't right.

On a more personal note, reflecting on these generational differences isn't just something I see in practice – it's something I see at home, when they descend back from university. With two children aged 18 and 22, I've had a front-row seat to how younger adults express dissatisfaction. What stands out is how quickly and directly they will voice concerns, often without the hesitation that older generations might have had at the same age. There's a confidence in how they assert themselves but also, at times, a bluntness that can come across as uncompromising, particularly when that frustration is expressed online rather than in person.

The 'faceless' complaint

There's something worth reflecting on here around what could be described as the faceless nature of modern complaints. When a patient sits in front of you, there's a natural pause before saying something critical. Online, that pause disappears. Digital platforms create distance. That distance can:

- Lower the threshold for complaining
- Make feedback more direct or sometimes more extreme
- Remove the opportunity to resolve things in the moment.

For younger generations, this isn't unusual behaviour it's just normal communication. Writing a review feels no different to sending a message or posting on social media. The difficulty for practices is that these

complaints often arrive fully formed, with no opportunity to step in earlier.

What actually triggers complaints?

Although the method of complaining varies, the reasons behind complaints are often very similar across all age groups.

Some of the most common triggers include:

- **Unmet expectations:** Patients don't always complain about what happened - they complain about the gap between what they thought would happen and what actually did.
- **Feeling unheard:** This comes up time and time again. Even when clinical care is good, patients who feel dismissed or rushed are far more likely to complain.
- **Cost issues:** Unexpected charges, unclear pricing or assumptions about what is included can quickly lead to dissatisfaction.
- **Communication breakdowns:** This might be inconsistent messaging, too much jargon, or simply not checking that the patient has understood.
- **Lack of ownership when things go wrong:** Patients don't expect perfection, but they do expect honesty, acknowledgement and a willingness to put things right.

Online reviews as the new complaint route

Online reviews have, in many ways, become an alternative complaints system. They are immediate, public, influential, and importantly, they sit outside the structure of formal complaint processes.

For NHS patients, there are established routes through the NHS complaints system. Private patients also have access to independent complaint services. These routes are structured, give both sides a chance to respond and aim for resolution.

Online reviews are different. They are often written in the moment, shaped by emotion, and visible to anyone searching for your practice. That doesn't make them less important, if anything, their impact can be greater.

The red flags are usually already there

When you spend time inside practices, you start to notice patterns. The same small issues

come up again and again and they're often present long before a complaint.

Typical examples include:

- Reception teams unsure how to handle early dissatisfaction
- Inconsistent explanations of fees
- Patients left waiting without updates
- Poor communication between clinicians and front-of-house staff
- Notes that don't fully reflect conversations or consent.

None of these on their own seem serious. But together, they create friction and that friction is what patients feel. It's about spotting the signs early, rather than reacting late.

Bridging the gap

Understanding generational differences isn't about labelling patients - it's about adapting.

Practices that do this well tend to:

- Offer multiple ways for patients to give feedback
- Respond to online reviews in a calm and professional way
- Encourage patients to raise concerns before they leave
- Make it clear how complaints can be raised, both NHS and privately.

At the end of the day, the basics don't change. Patients want to feel listened to, respected and informed.

Conclusion

Complaints in dentistry are changing. They're more immediate, more visible, and increasingly shaped by how different generations communicate. The shift towards online, 'faceless' complaints mean practices don't always get the chance to fix things before they're made public.

But when you look closely, most complaints still come back to the same core issues: communication, expectations, and how patients feel they've been treated.

The practices that manage this well aren't necessarily the ones with the fewest problems. They're the ones that notice the small warning signs early and act on them. Because in most cases, the complaint was already there, you just couldn't see it yet. ♦

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