



THE ANNUAL PATIENT AND PUBLIC SURVEY

ON BEHALF OF THE GENERAL DENTAL COUNCIL

**General
Dental
Council**

protecting patients,
regulating the dental team

JUNE 2011



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INTRODUCTION

As an organisation independent of the Government and National Health Service, the GDC is the organisation that regulates dental professionals in the United Kingdom. All dental care professionals must be registered with the GDC in order to work in the UK. The GDC's purpose is to protect the public and regulate dental professionals.

ComRes was commissioned by the GDC to conduct the Annual Patient and Public Survey aimed at gaining patient and public understanding of the dental profession generally and the GDC specifically. The following objectives were addressed:

- To capture **public** and **patient** awareness and perceptions of the GDC.
- To provide the GDC with a snapshot of how **patients** and the **public** at large view particular policy initiatives that are being developed by the GDC.
- To test **public** views and levels of understanding of core issues that are currently prevalent within the dentistry profession, including regulation.
- To benchmark the GDC's reputation against comparator organisations.

Overall, this research will inform the direction of the GDC's 2010-2014 Corporate Strategy.

This research establishes a set of questions which will provide a benchmark to be tracked in future waves of the research. In addition, there are a series of topical questions for this year. These will change with time and questions in subsequent annual surveys will be amended to reflect GDC business and policy priorities. This year's topical questions include the following issues:

- Standards for Dental Professionals
- The impact of displaying GDC registration
- Confidence in treatment
- Dental indemnity
- Direct Access to Dental Care Professionals

METHODOLOGY

ComRes conducted a face to face survey of 1531 adults across the UK between 8th and 17th April 2011. Data were weighted to be representative of all adults. An additional booster sample was conducted in Northern Ireland so as to ensure a robust sample size of 100 people was reached. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

For a sample size of 1531 adults in the UK, this gives a maximum margin of error of +/- 2.5% at a 95% confidence interval.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research demonstrates that there is strong public support for regulating dentistry. However, it is also evident that the public does not have a clear understanding of who is responsible for regulating dental professionals and overall people have low levels of awareness of the GDC.

Throughout the report people are classified into two groups: (i) '*patients*', (those who have visited the dentist in the last twelve months) and (ii) '*public*' (those who have not visited the dentist in the last twelve months). Where this distinction is not specified then the report refers to all people, both patients and the public.

There is an encouraging level of trust and satisfaction among people towards their own dentists and dental care professionals.

In the last twelve months, **65% of the UK population have visited a dentist.**

Overall, 69% of the population believe that dentists are regulated – more than for most medical professions (apart from doctors). However, just **11% of people are able to correctly identify the General Dental Council as the body responsible for regulation.** In fact, people are most likely to associate the British Dental Association with responsibility for regulating the profession (44%).

One in four people had definitely or probably heard of the GDC before this research was conducted, but **70% say that they have not heard of the GDC.** While this is a challenge that the GDC will need to address, 79% of people who are already aware of the GDC are 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' that it is effective at regulating the profession. Similarly, people who know the GDC (84%) are 'very' or 'fairly' confident that professionals are adhering to the rules laid out by the GDC.

The roles and functions that the GDC carries out are all considered to be very important by members of the public. When it comes to the registration of dentists and dental care professionals, it is evident that there is some lack of understanding among the public as to what the process entails, yet more than 60% of people believe it is true that there is a publicly available register and that only qualified dentists registered with the GDC can practise in the UK.

The public believe that regulation and registration of dentists are important. However, **44% of dental patients do not check whether their dentist or dental care professional is qualified to treat them** - many simply assume that this is they are qualified or take it on trust.

When looking at addressing concerns or complaints, it is encouraging that the General Dental Council is the organisation most likely to be contacted. 24% of people would approach the GDC if they had a complaint about a dental professional. Most people (70%) are confident that any complaint about dentistry treatment would be successfully resolved; however patients are more likely, than the wider public, to be confident that this would be the case.

The most effective way for the General Dental Council to communicate with the public is through providing information in dental surgeries, or through dental professionals themselves.

Indeed, of those people who are already aware of the GDC they tend to have heard of the GDC primarily through information at the surgery or through their dentist or dental care professional. Although other media sources (e.g. television and newspapers) are useful to improve awareness,

contact through the dental practice or dental professional is also considered to be the best for getting information to members of the public about both the GDC and the Dental Complaints Service.

The quality of care, professionalism and cleanliness of the staff and workplaces are key drivers of patient confidence in their dental professionals. An individual's experience of receiving treatment is likely to be a more important factor in giving them confidence in their dentist than public display of qualifications or accreditation. It is also more important than registration and professional affiliation – although these are not unimportant.

Encouragingly for the GDC, 60% of people are more likely to feel confident in their dentist or dental professional if they display their GDC registration. In particular, people would like to see the registration displayed in the practice or waiting room.

The overwhelming majority of patients are confident in (94%) and satisfied with (95%) the dental treatment that they have received. Primarily, this is down to their experience of high-quality and professional care. Good communication with patients and information on treatments and cost is also important for patients.

The minority of people who are not confident in the treatment they receive say that this is due to the cost, a lack of information or poor communication. This just highlights the value of good communication and information provision in determining patient satisfaction and confidence.

In the topical part of the survey, we also addressed the issue of dental indemnity. Overall, around one in three people are aware that they can recover costs if they suffer damage in dental treatments, but 65% of people are not aware of this. However, it is evident that this is an important issue for the public as 81% of people believe that it is very important that dentists are required by law to have insurance to cover them for any claims made against them.

Opinion is split, however, over the issue of referrals for dental care professionals (e.g. hygienists and therapists) from dentists. **48% of people prefer the current system, while 41% would prefer to have more choice to be able to go directly to a dental care professional without a referral.** Those who prefer to keep the current system say that this is because they trust their dentist and do not see a reason to change a system they believe is working. On the other hand, those who wish to change the system say that this is mainly because they would prefer choice and the convenience of finding a professional themselves.

SECTION ONE: PUBLIC AND PATIENT USE OF DENTISTS

In order to segment the sample and to understand the current use of dentists in the UK, members of the public were asked about their current patterns of visiting dentists. This question is also used to identify those who we subsequently classify as ‘patients’, (those visiting the dentist in the last twelve months), or those defined as ‘public’ (those who have not visited the dentist in the last twelve months).

1.1 Use of Dentists

A. When was the last time you went to the dentist?

As can be seen in the chart below, more than half (53%) of the UK population has visited the dentist in the last six months and a further 12% have visited in the last 7 to 12 months. Therefore, two thirds of the population (65%) have been dental patients in the last twelve months. This group will be analysed in detail throughout the report.

One in ten people do not go to the dentist or have never been to the dentist.

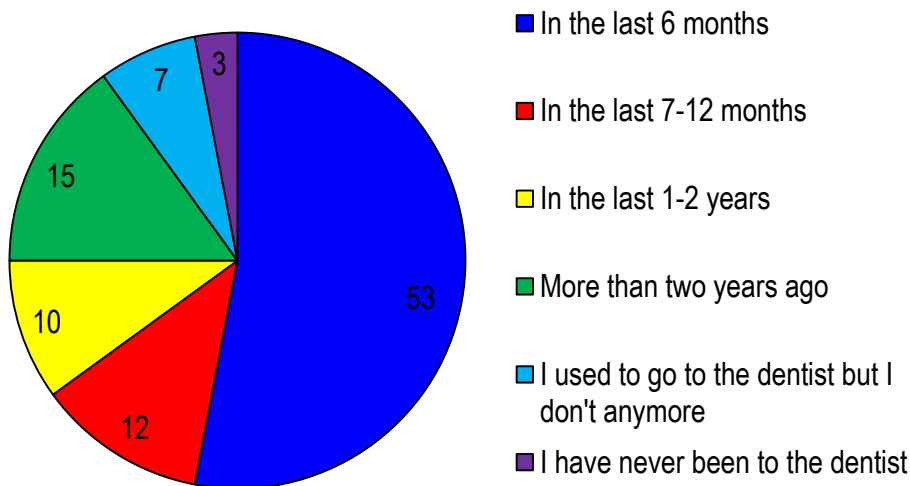
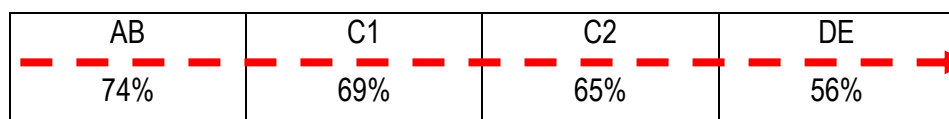


Figure 1.1: Time of last dentist visit

Base: All people

- There is a trend by social group: while 74% of people in social group AB have visited the dentist in the last 12 months, this decreases to 56% of people in social group DE.



- Women are more likely than men to have visited the dentist in the last 12 months – 70% and 61% respectively.

B. On average, how often do you go to the dentist?

On average, 69% of people go to the dentist at least once a year and a further 7% of people go once every two years. The chart below shows the frequency of visits to the dentist on average.

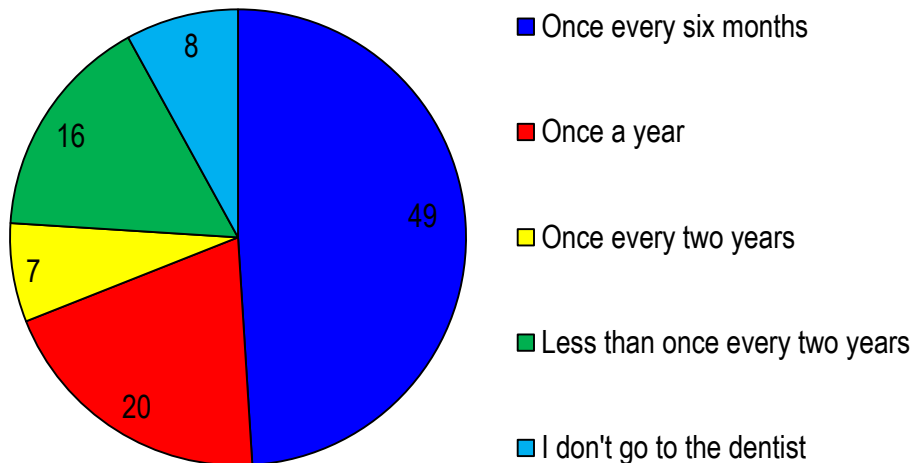


Figure 1.2: Average frequency of visit to dentist
Base: All people

- People aged between 45 and 54 are the most likely to go to the dentist about once every six months (58%). This compares to just 41% of people aged 18-24 years old.
- People in social group AB (55%) are more likely to go to the dentist every six months than those in social group DE (44%).

1.2 NHS and Private Dentists

People who are dental patients were asked whether they receive private or NHS treatment, or whether they receive both.

C. Which one of the following options best describes the dental treatment that you receive?

- I receive dental treatment from the NHS
- I receive dental treatment privately
- I receive dental treatment from the NHS and privately
- I don't know whether I receive dental treatment from the NHS or privately

The majority of dental patients receive NHS treatment (61%) and just more than a quarter (27%) receive only private dental treatment; 9% receive both NHS and private.

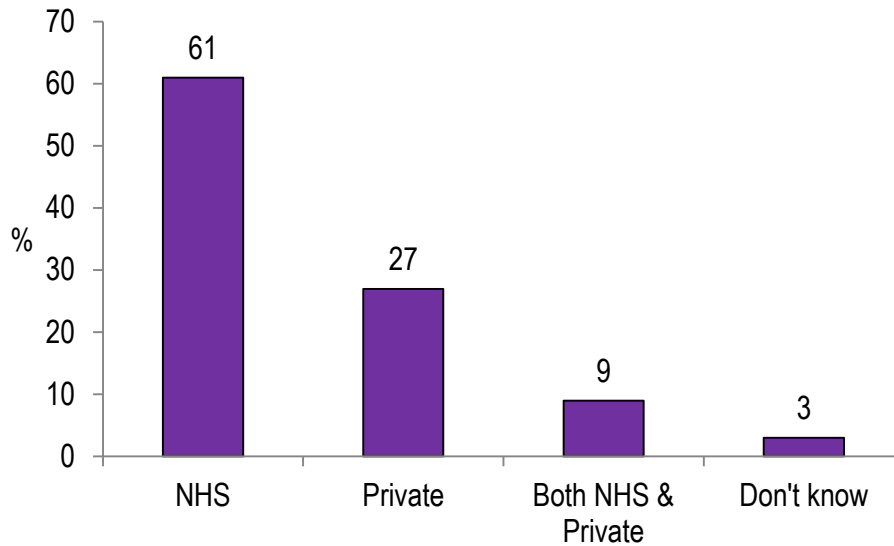


Figure 1.3: Type of dentistry treatment
Base: All patients

- As perhaps may be expected, there is a trend by social group. People in the higher-earning income groups are more likely to receive private treatment than those who are in the lower-earning income groups.

	AB	C1	C2	DE
NHS	50%	61%	64%	71%
Private	39%	27%	23%	19%
Both NHS & Private	11%	10%	7%	6%

- Although there is a trend by social group, it is worth noting that the majority of people in every social group are more likely to chose to have NHS dentistry treatment.

SECTION TWO: ATTITUDES TO DENTAL REGULATION

This next section explores the public’s understanding of the regulation of the dentistry profession. In order to ensure a clear and consistent understanding of dental regulation, a brief explanation was used:

“By regulation we mean protecting the patient by setting standards for dentists/dental professionals and taking action where the standards are not met”.

Before exploring public and patient understanding of dentistry regulation, we benchmarked dentistry among other regulated medical professions.

1. Which of the following professions, if any, do you think are regulated? (multiple response)

More than two thirds of the UK population think that dentists are regulated. This is encouraging for the General Dental Council, although as is evident later this awareness is perhaps not as developed as it could be. Dentists follow doctors and are ahead of other medical professions in terms of public recognition of its regulation.

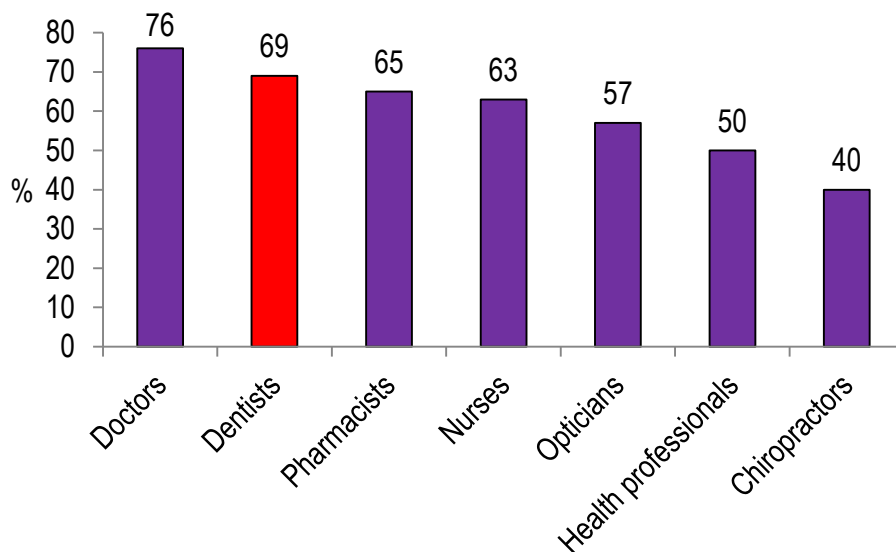


Figure 2.1: Regulation of medical professionals

Base: All people

Looking at the demographic breakdowns, there are some interesting observations to make:

- There is a trend by social group, with people in social group AB more likely to think that dentists are regulated than those in group DE (from 82% to 54% respectively).
- Patients are also more likely than other members of the public to know that dentists are regulated – 74% and 60% respectively.

2. How important or unimportant is it to you that Dentists and Dental Care Professionals are regulated?
3. How important or unimportant is it to you that Dentists and Dental Care Professionals are qualified and registered with a central body in order to provide dental care?

People were asked how important it is that dentists and dental care professionals are (i) regulated; and (ii) qualified and registered with a central body. The results are summarised in the chart below. People scored the importance on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 indicating 'not important' and 10 'very important'.

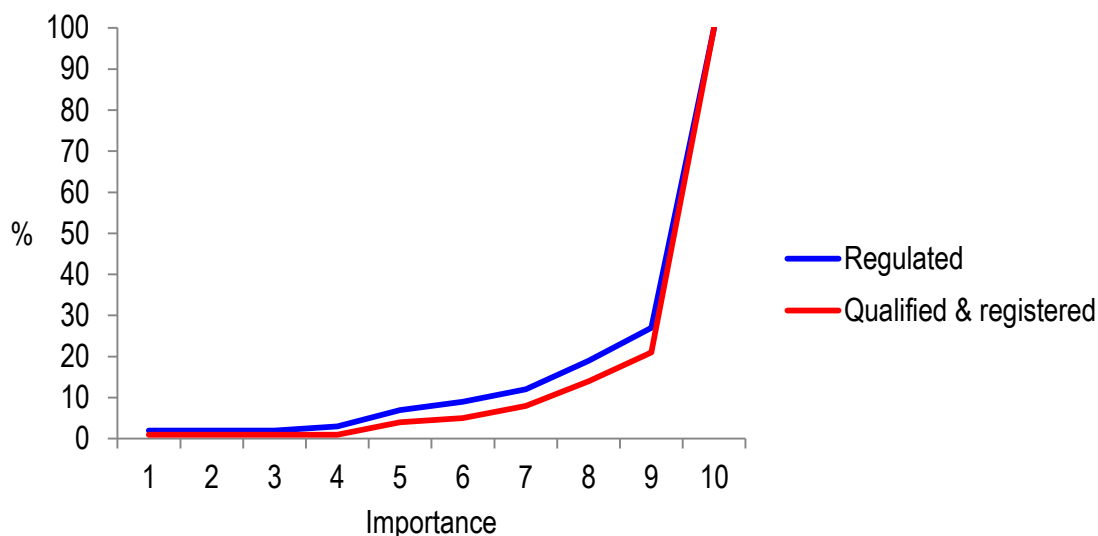


Figure 2.2: Cumulative importance of regulation and registration
Base: All people

A significant majority of people say that regulation and being qualified and registered with a central body is 'very important' giving a score of 10 out of 10. Indeed, 73% of people gave a score of 10 'very important' for regulating dentists and dental care professionals and 78% gave the same score for being qualified and registered with a central body in order to provide dental care. On average, people give both of these high scores of 9.18 (for regulation) and 9.38 (for qualification and registration).

It is important to consider these results in the context of the rest of the research. People believe it is very important that dental professionals are both regulated and qualified and registered, yet there are low levels of awareness of what this looks like in practice and where responsibility lies.

- 79% of people in social group AB think it is 'very important' that dental professionals are regulated. However, this declines among other social groups with just 64% of people in social group DE giving a score of 10.

SECTION THREE: AWARENESS OF DENTAL REGULATION

Though there is overwhelming support for regulating dental professionals (see figure 2.2, page 11) there are low levels of awareness and some confusion as to who is responsible.

4. Do you know the name of the organisation that regulates dentistry, or not?

Without any prompting, the vast majority of people are not aware that the GDC regulates dentistry. Indeed just 3% of people cite the GDC. 7% of people say that they believe that the British Dental Association regulates dentistry and a few people mention other organisations like the Department of Health or their local Primary Care Trust.

Those who did not know that the GDC regulates the profession were then asked to select from a prompted list which organisation they believe has responsibility for regulating dentistry.

5. Which one of the following, if any, do you think is responsible for regulating dentistry?

The chart below shows the combined responses for questions four and five. As is clear, just more than one in ten people are aware that the GDC is the body responsible for the regulation of dentists. It is important to note that 44% of people believe that the British Dental Association has this role. One in four people say that they do not know and do not state an organisation (25%).

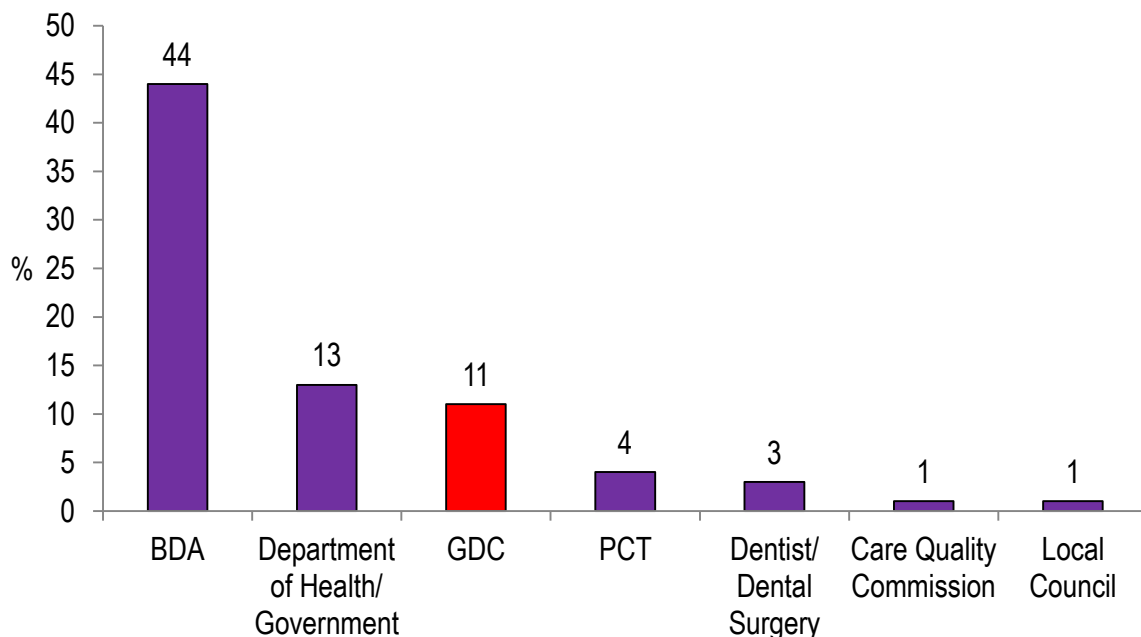


Figure 3.1: Responsibility for regulation of dentists
Base: All people

6. Which of the following best describes how aware you were of the General Dental Council before this survey?

Before participating in the survey, one in ten people say they had definitely heard of the GDC and 15% of people think that they have heard of the GDC. However, 70% of people have not heard of the GDC.

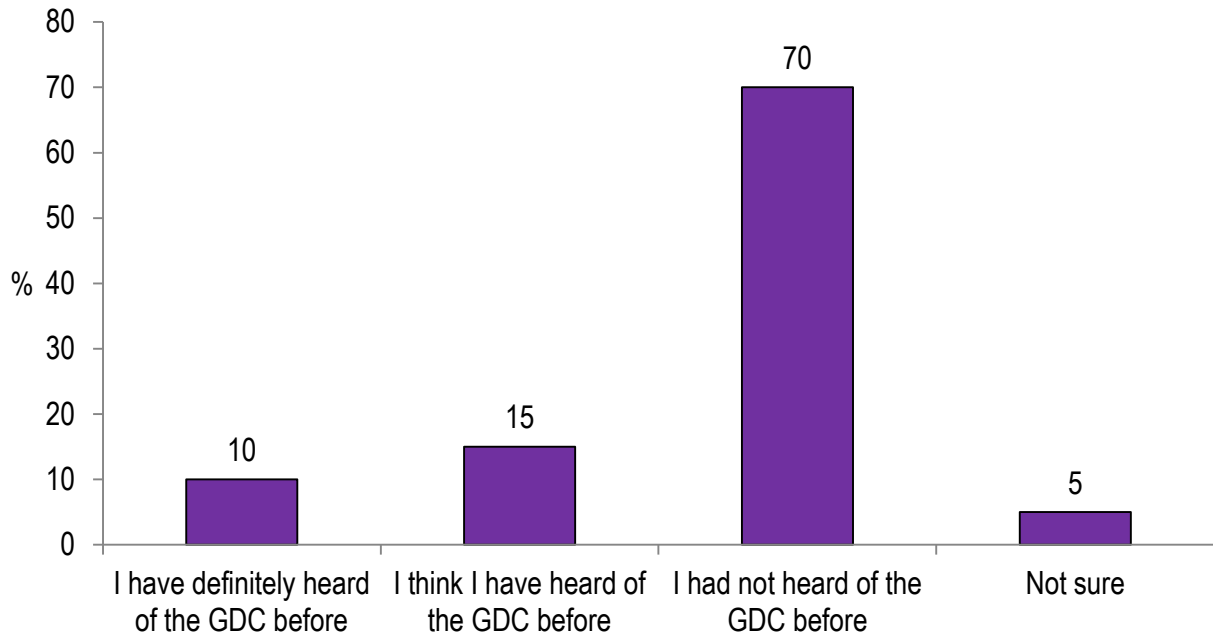


Figure 3.2: Awareness of the GDC
Base: All people

In order to help the GDC identify key audiences to communicate with, it is useful to examine the profile of those people who are aware and those who are not aware of the GDC.

- Men are more likely than women to say that they had definitely heard of the GDC before, 12% and 8% respectively. Interestingly, this is a trend that is seen across public polling that women are often more likely to say that they 'don't know' or are unsure, compared to men.
- People aged 55 to 64 are most likely to say that they have definitely or probably heard of the GDC before (37% overall). This compares to just 17% of people aged 18-24 who have definitely or think they have heard of the GDC.
- 27% of people in England and 24% of people in Scotland say that they are definitely or probably aware of the GDC, this compares to 22% in Northern Ireland and 19% in Wales.
- However, across England people in the South and Midlands are more likely than people in the North to be aware of the GDC.
- 27% of patients, compared to 22% of non-patients are definitely or probably aware of the GDC before the survey.

SECTION FOUR: GDC PERFORMANCE

People who are aware of the GDC were asked how confident they are that the GDC is achieving its two primary roles of: (i) regulating the industry and (ii) encouraging dentists and dental care professionals to follow the GDC's rules.

7. **Overall how confident or otherwise are you that the General Dental Council is regulating dentists/dental care professionals effectively?**
8. **And overall how confident or otherwise are you that dentists/dental care professionals follow the General Dental Council rules?**

Encouragingly for the General Dental Council, the majority of people who are aware of the organisation are very or fairly confident that these two things are being achieved. Indeed, 79% of people who are aware of the GDC are confident that the organisation is effectively regulating dentistry professionals and 84% of people are confident that dentistry professionals are following the GDC rules.

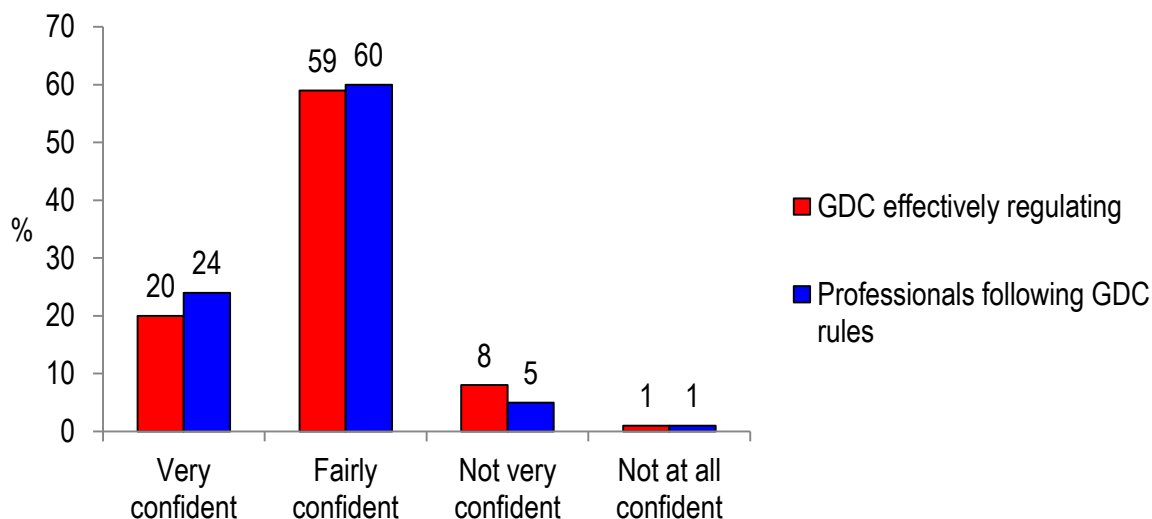


Figure 4.1: Confidence in the GDC's performance
Base: People who are aware of the GDC

- It is interesting to note that the lower age groups and the higher age groups are less likely to be confident and more likely to say that they do not know, compared to the middle age groups. Indeed, 68% of people aged 65 or over and 73% of people aged 18-24 are confident that the GDC is effectively regulating professionals, compared to 89% of people aged 45-54. This is not a common trend and, in fact, when there is a difference by age group, it tends to either increase or decrease with age, rather than peak in the middle.
- People in Wales are less likely to be confident than people across the rest of the UK. 71% are confident in the GDC regulating the profession and 75% confident that professionals are following GDC rules.

At this point in the survey participants were informed of the role of the GDC as below:

“The General Dental Council (the GDC) is the regulator for dental professionals. By regulation we mean protecting the patient by setting standards for dentists/dental professionals and taking action where the standards are not met.”

9. For each of the statements below please state whether you think it is true or false.

- a) Only qualified dentists registered by the GDC can work as dentists in the UK.
- b) There is a publicly available GDC register that allows me to check whether a dentist/dental care professional is legally qualified to provide dental care.

67% of people think that it is true that “only qualified dentists registered by the GDC can work as dentists in the UK” and 63% of people think that “there is a publicly available GDC register that allows me to check whether a dentist/dental care professional is legally qualified to provide dental care”

It is encouraging that around two thirds of all people believe these statements to be true, but it is evident that around one in four, or one in five people do not know whether these are true or false. There is an opportunity here for the GDC to build on this encouraging result.

Interestingly, people who are aware of the GDC are more likely to think that each of these statements is true. Indeed, 79% of people who are aware of the GDC believe only qualified dentists registered by the GDC can practice in the UK and 74% of people who are aware think it is true that there is a publicly available register.

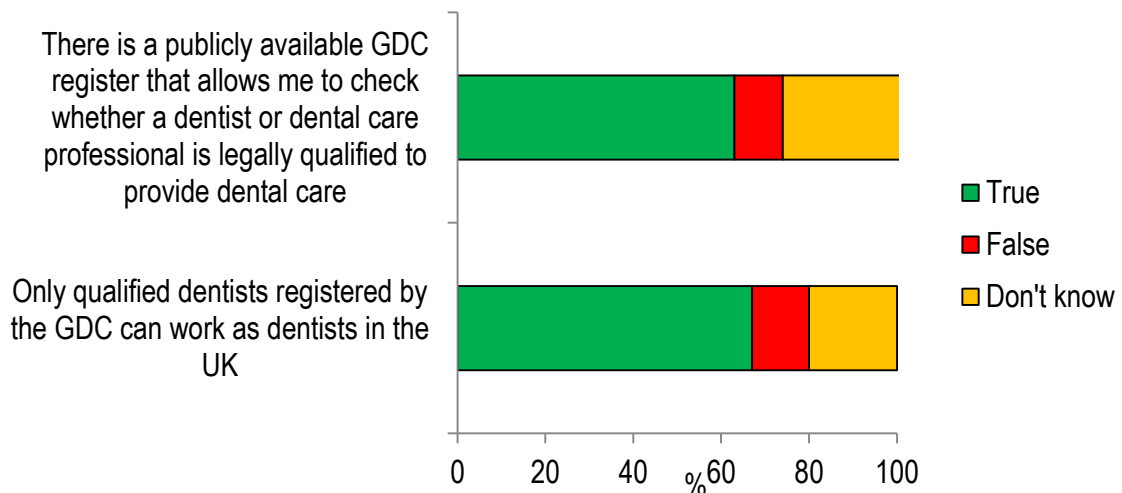


Figure 4.2: Understanding of the role of the GDC

Base: All people

- For both statements, patients (who have visited the dentist in the last 12 months) are more likely than the public (who have not visited the dentist in the last 12 months) to think that each of these is true.
- In this situation, people in older age groups (aged 55 or over) are more likely to admit that they don't know than other age groups.

10. I am going to present you with a list of some of the functions that the GDC can carry out. Could you tell me how important or unimportant you think each of these functions are?

People were presented with a list of functions of the GDC and were asked to score them on a scale of importance from 1 to 10 where 1 indicates 'not important' and 10 equals 'very important'. It is immediately evident that people believe that each of these functions is very important. Average scores have been calculated and are given in the table below. All the scores are within 0.13 of each other indicating people consider each of the functions to be very important.

	Mean score
Investigating allegations of misconduct	9.41
Maintaining and regulating standards of professionals skills	9.40
Keeping an up-to-date register of dental professionals	9.39
Assuring standards of professional training	9.39
Enabling patients to report misconduct	9.39
Setting standards of performance	9.36
Maintaining and regulating standards of behaviour / conduct	9.36
Requiring dentist to demonstrate that their skills and knowledge are kept up to date	9.35
Setting rules of conduct / behaviour	9.33
Possessing the power to discipline or 'strike off' dental professionals who breach standards	9.34
Dealing with patient complaints	9.28

Figure 4.3: Importance of functions of the GDC
Base: All people

- Women are consistently more likely than men to say that each of these functions should be important – awarding higher mean scores than men.
- Similarly, people in Northern Ireland consistently give higher mean scores for importance than the rest of the UK.

SECTION FIVE: COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

This section looks at public and patient attitudes towards choosing their dentist and also the complaints procedure.

11. How, if at all, do you check whether or not the dental professionals you used were qualified to treat you? (multiple response)

More than two in five patients have not checked whether the dental professionals that they used were qualified (44%). 11% of patients assume that dental professionals are qualified because of a referral and a further 16% simply assume they were fit to practise.

Most commonly, one in five people say that their dentist, or dental care professional, displays their certificates so that patients can check that they are qualified. 3% of dental patients have checked with the General Dental Council that their dentist is qualified to treat them.

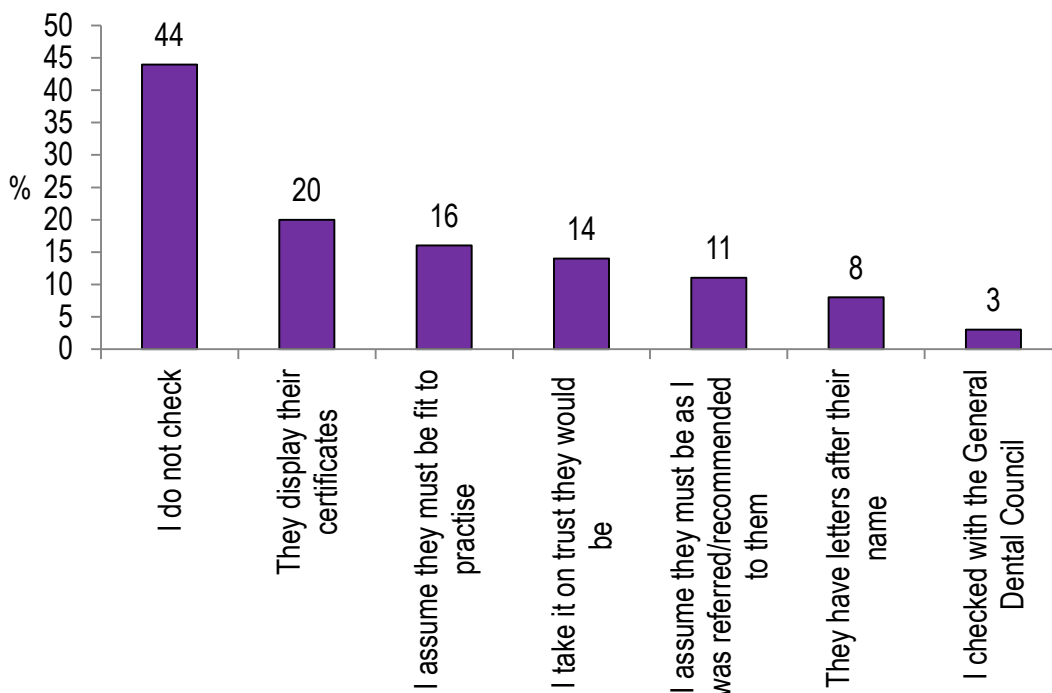


Figure 5.1: Choosing a qualified dentist
Base: All patients

- Half of all dental patients aged under 35 do not check that their dentist is qualified.
- People in England are more likely to check that their dentist is qualified than in other areas of the UK. 41% of people in England do not check, compared to 51% of people in Wales and Northern Ireland.

12. Please tell me which, if any, of these people or organisations you would contact if you had cause for concern or wished to complain about the skills or behaviour of a dental professional? (multiple response)

Encouragingly for the GDC they are the organisation most likely to be approached if a member of the public had a concern or wished to complain about the skills or behaviour of a dental professional. A quarter of people say that they would contact the GDC in these circumstances. Interestingly, one in five people say that they would contact the BDA or the practice manager where they receive treatment.

15% of people would go directly to the professional concerned and 14% would approach the Dental Complaints Service.

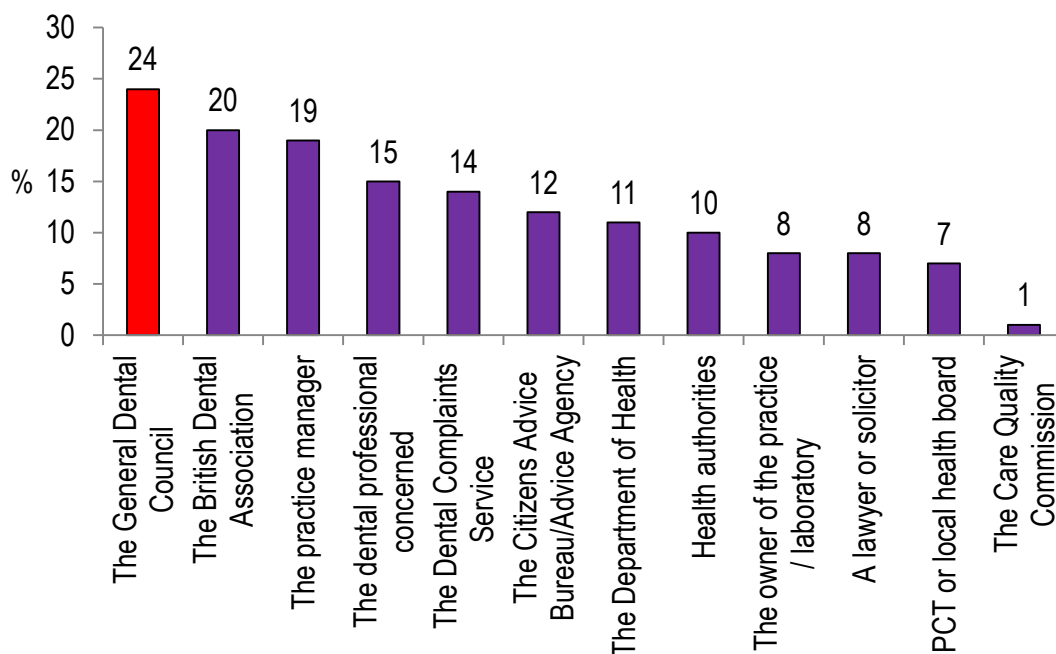


Figure 5.2: Where people would make a complaint about a dentist
Base: All people

- There is a trend by social group for whether people would approach the GDC for advice if they had a concern. While 35% of people in social group AB would approach the GDC, this falls to just 17% of those in social group DE, as shown in the table below.

AB	C1	C2	DE
35%	25%	21%	17%

- Interestingly, there are no significant differences between people who are patients and people who are not.

13. If you needed to make a complaint about a dentist, how confident would you be that the complaint would be resolved fairly?

The majority of people (70%) are very or fairly confident that if they needed to make a complaint it would be resolved fairly. Just 18% are not confident and 12% say that they do not know.

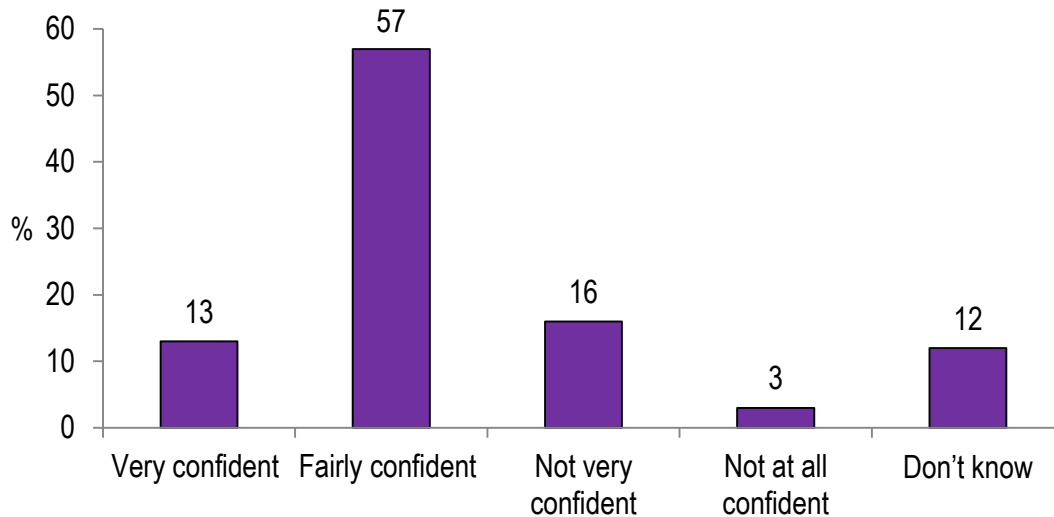


Figure 5.3: Confidence in fair resolution of complaints
Base: All people

- It is important to note that there is a difference in confidence levels among patients and non-patients. As can be seen in the chart below, three quarters of patients are very or fairly confident in the resolution of complaints, compared to 62% of members of the wider public.

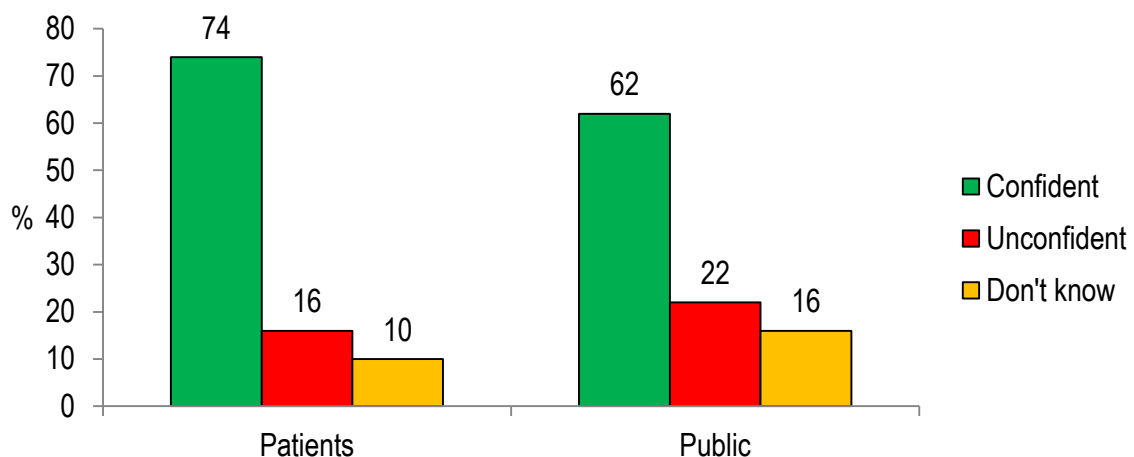


Figure 5.4: Patient and public confidence in fair resolution of complaints
Base: All people, by patients and public

- While still a majority, the confidence figure falls to 59% among people who never go to the dentist.
- People in Wales are least likely to be confident of a fair resolution – 62%, compared to more than 70% in the other countries.

SECTION SIX: GDC COMMUNICATIONS

14. How did you first hear about the General Dental Council?

All people who say that they had heard of the GDC, or think they heard of the GDC, before the survey were asked where they first came across the GDC.

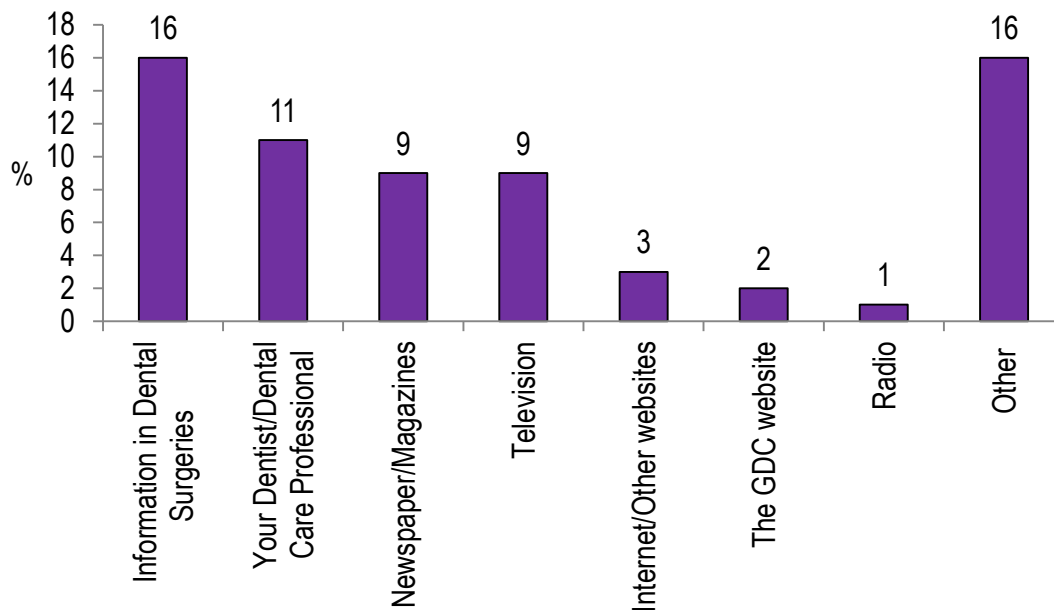


Figure 6.1: First engagement with the GDC
Base: People who are aware of the GDC

There are a variety of ways in which people first came across the GDC. It is most likely that it was through either information in a dental surgery (14%) or through a dentist or dental care professional (11%). Others heard of the GDC through media or the internet, with 2% of people saying that they first heard about the GDC through their website. Other ways in which people came into contact with the GDC include friends and family; work; or just from general knowledge or awareness.

- Younger people (18-34 years old) are more likely to be aware of the GDC through the internet or specifically the GDC website than people in older age groups.
- Interestingly, people who are not dental patients but have heard of the GDC are most likely to have heard of the organisation on television (13%).
- People without internet access are most likely to have heard about the GDC through their surgery (20%) or through television (13%).

15. Can you tell me which of the following you believe would be the best ways for the General Dental Council to explain its role and services to you? (multiple response)

In order to help the GDC best understand how to communicate with the public, people were asked to select the top three best ways for the GDC to communicate with them from a list.

The most popular method was by ‘leaflets in dental practices’ – 53% of people selected this as one of the best ways for the GDC to explain its role and services to the public. This was followed by television (37%) and newspaper and magazine articles (23%).

One in seven people (14%) say that the GDC website would be one of the best ways for the GDC to communicate its functions to them.

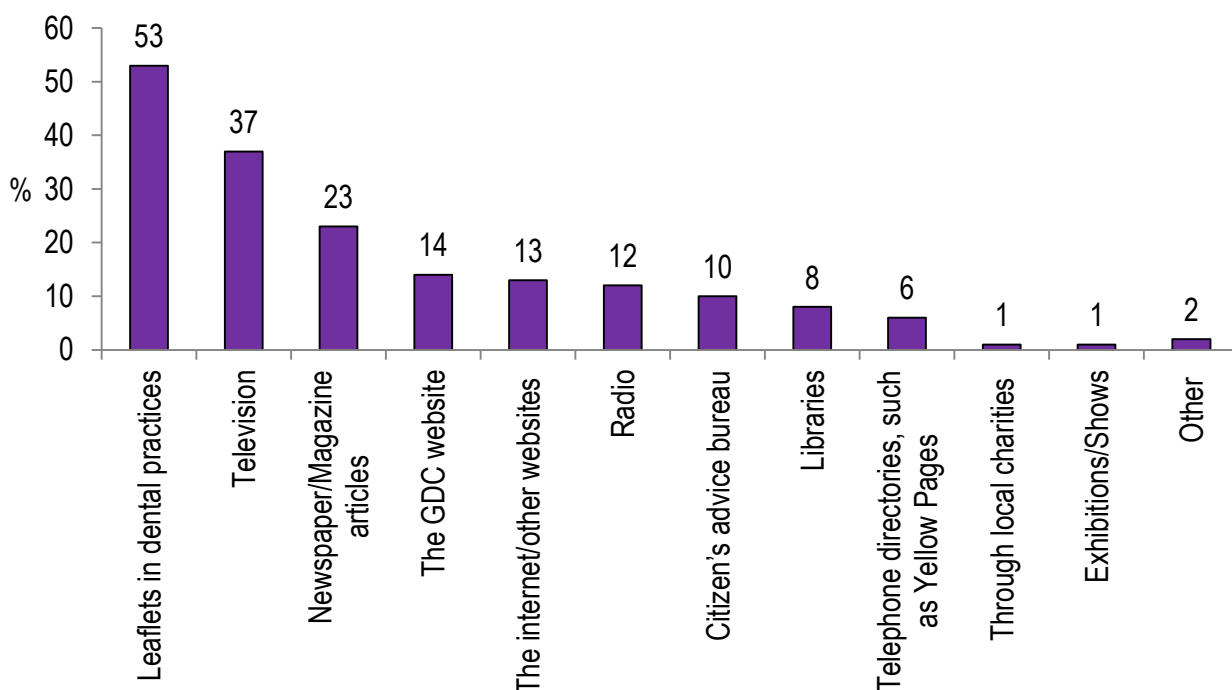


Figure 6.2: Best method of communication for GDC to explain its role to the public

Base: All people

In order for the GDC to communicate most effectively with the public, it may be useful for the GDC to think about different sub-groups and how to approach different types of people. There are a few interesting differences which are worth observing:

- Women are more likely than men to say that leaflets in dental practices are the best method of communication and men are slightly more likely to prefer television or website communications than women.
- As might be expected, 58% of patients, compared to 42% of non-patients, say that leaflets in dental practices are one of the best ways for the GDC to explain its role to them.
- People in Northern Ireland (28%) are more likely to favour the GDC’s website than the other regions – England (15%), Scotland (11%) and Wales (8%).

16. Have you heard of the Dental Complaints Service before today, or not?

The majority of people (83%) have not heard of the Dental Complaints Service before the interview. 5% of people have definitely heard and a further 8% of people think that they have heard of the DCS.

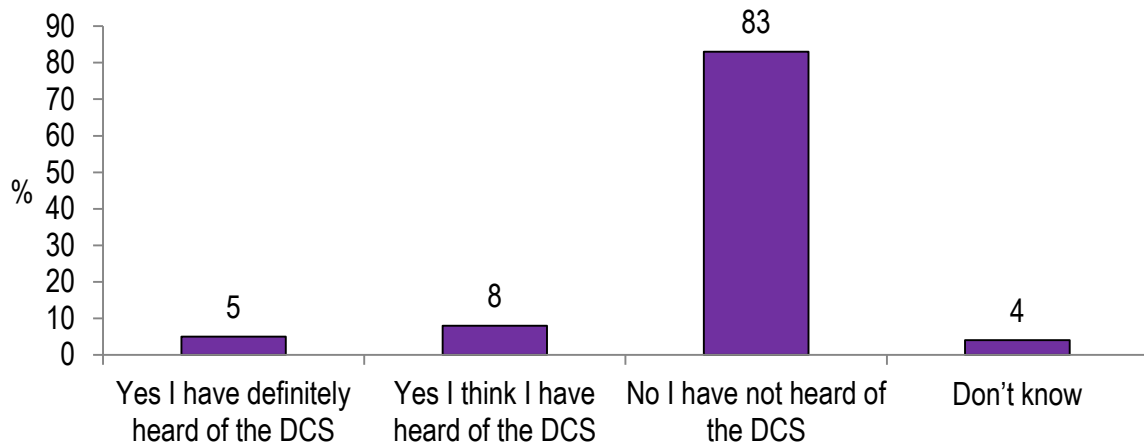


Figure 6.3: Awareness of the DCS
Base: All people

There are not significant differences between different demographic groups. However, people who use private dental care are slightly more likely to have heard of the DCS than those who use NHS services –17% and 11% respectively.

17. How did you first hear about the Dental Complaints Service?

Those people who have heard of the DCS were asked where they first heard about it. One in five (18%) heard of the DCS through their dentist or dental care practitioner and a further 18% through a dental surgery. These are the same ways in which people were most likely to have heard about the General Dental Council and so communication through practitioners and the surgeries appears to be most effective. 3% of people have come across the DCS through the GDC or DCS website.

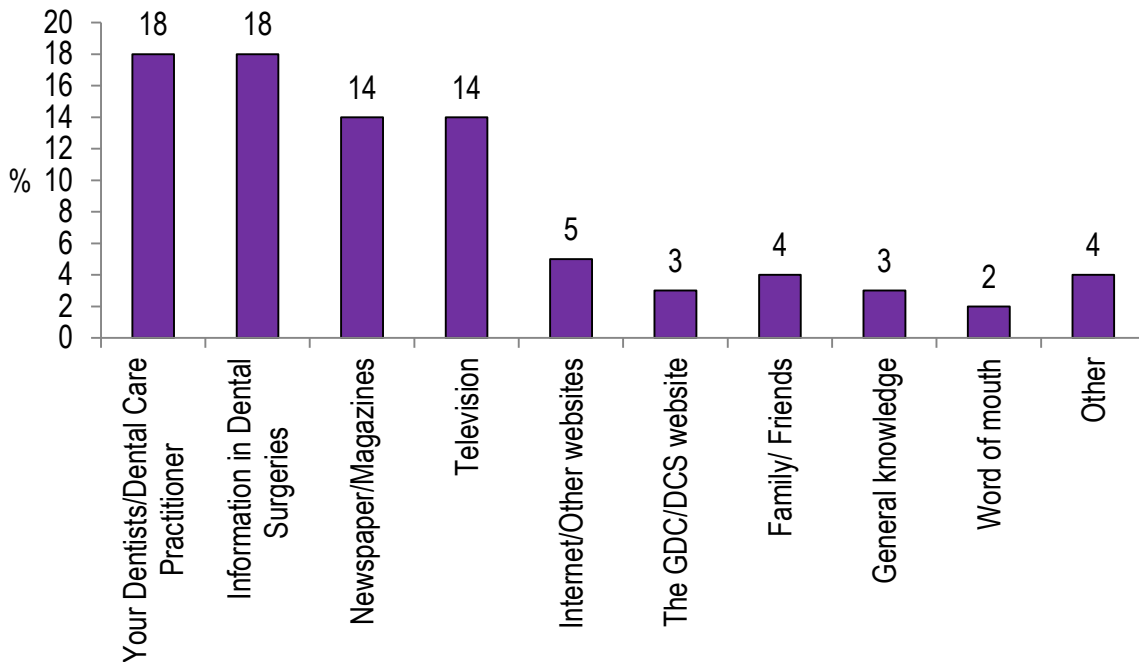


Figure 6.4: Awareness of the DCS
Base: People who are aware of the DCS

18. Which of these, if any, would be the best ways for the Dental Complaints Service to explain its role and services to you? (multiple response)

Currently 13% of people are aware of the DCS, but all people were asked to indicate the top three best ways of DCS communicating with them. The chart below summarises the results.

The top three preferred forms of communications are the same as those for the GDC. 55% of people would prefer for the DCS to communicate with them through leaflets in their dental surgery. This is followed by television (39%) and newspapers and magazines (22%).

61% of patients say that contact through leaflets in dental practices would be the best way to provide information on the role and services of the DCS.

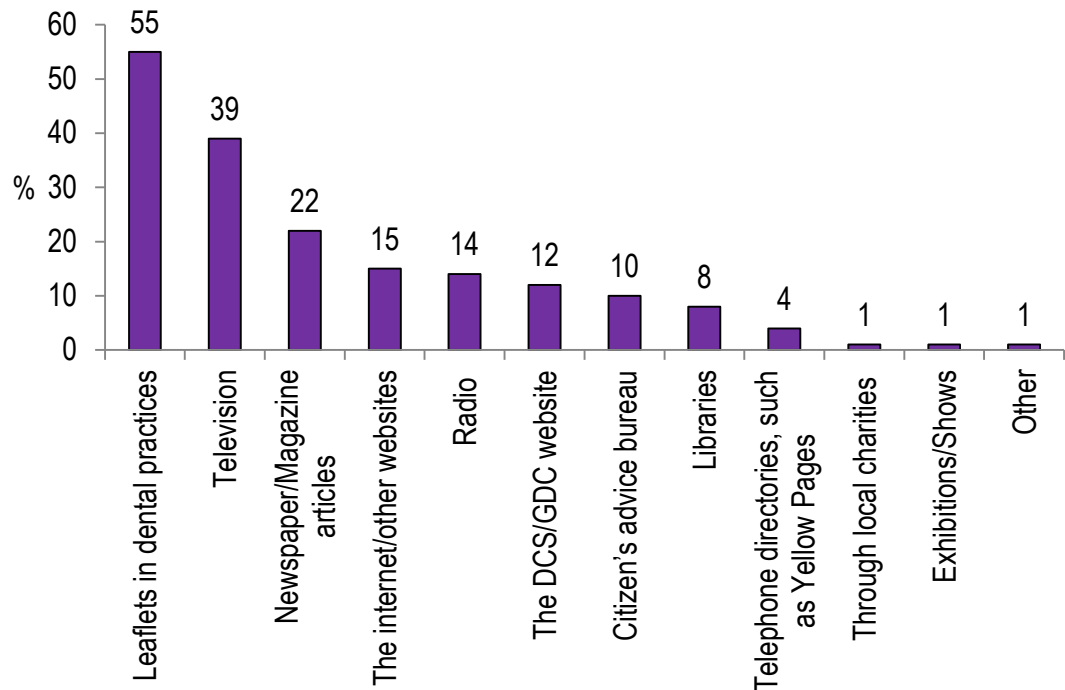


Figure 6.5: Best DCS communication with the public
Base: All people

- Interestingly, leaflets in dental practices are a more popular form of communication in the devolved regions than in England. 69% of people in Wales, 63% of people in Scotland and 56% of people in Northern Ireland say leaflets in dental practices would be one of the best ways to communicate with them.

SECTION SEVEN: STANDARDS AND DENTAL PROFESSIONALISM

These next sections look at some of the key topical issues facing the dentistry profession at the moment.

7.1 Confidence in dental professionals

19. I am going to ask you about what qualities are most important to you in giving you confidence in your dentist/dental care professional. For each of the following, please can you tell us how important they are to you on a scale of 1-10 with 1 indicating not important and 10 very important.

Patients were asked to score each of the qualities listed in the table below on a scale of 1 to 10 and mean scores were calculated where 1 indicates 'not important' and 10 indicates 'very important'.

As is evident from the table below, each of these qualities are considered to be very important to patients in giving them confidence in their dentist or dental care professional. At the top of the list is the cleanliness of the environment and the people who work in the practice, with a score of 9.71 out of 10. Indeed, 86% of people gave cleanliness a score of 10 out of 10.

Following this, 81% of people scored 10 out of 10 for *good knowledge or technical ability*, giving an average score of 9.63.

	Mean score
Cleanliness of workplaces, equipment and people	9.71
Good knowledge / technical ability	9.63
Good treatment outcomes / success rate	9.57
Treating you with dignity and respect	9.57
Good communication skills / explaining things well	9.50
Involving you in treatment decisions	9.42
Dealing with your complaint/concern	9.42
Being up-to-date with new developments in their field	9.35

Figure 7.1: Important qualities in dental professionals

Base: Patients only

For each of these qualities, at least 70% of patients scored 10 out of 10, indicating that all of these are very important for the majority of people.

Following this, patients were asked how important a professional's qualifications, accreditation and regulation are, as well as the administration of their records.

20. How important, or otherwise, are each of the following in giving you confidence in your dentist?

Scores were given on a scale of 1-10 with 1 indicating 'not important' and 10 'very important'. Mean scores were calculated to aid analysis.

	Mean scores
Being registered with a regulator	9.43
Efficient administration of your personal records	9.34
Displaying clear information about treatment fees and costs transparency	9.30
Having affiliation with professional bodies	9.05
Having formal accreditation e.g. certificate on his/her practice wall	8.90
Having letters after their name	7.79

Figure 7.2: Confidence in dental professionals
Base: Patients only

The most important of these factors for giving patients confidence in their dental professionals is being registered with a regulator, with a mean score of 9.43. Interestingly, all of these other factors receive high scores, but they are lower than those given to the qualities addressed in question 19.

In particular, the least important factor in determining public confidence in dentists is *having letters after their name* which receives a mean score of 7.79. 45% of people give this a score of 10 out of 10, but 24% give a score of 5 or below.

7.2 Displaying GDC registration

21. Would you be more or less likely to trust your dental professional if they made it clear that they are registered with the GDC in their surgery, or would it make no difference?

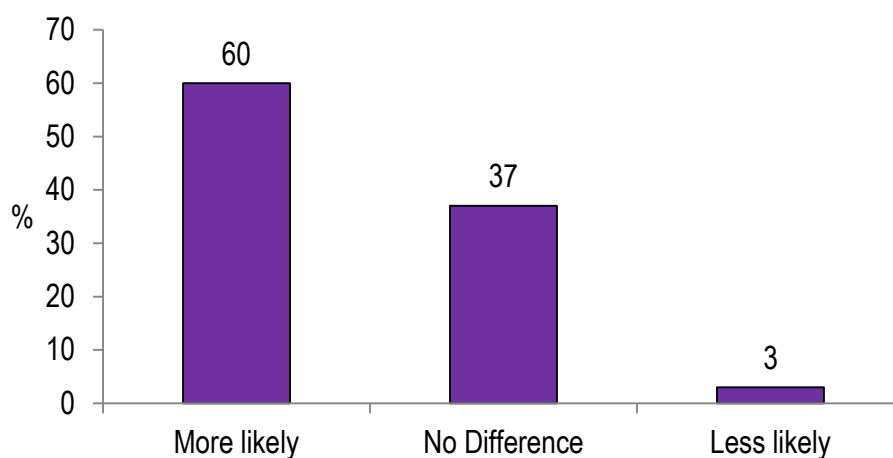


Figure 7.3: Trust in GDC registration
Base: Patients only

Encouragingly for the General Dental Council, 60% of patients would be more likely to trust their dentist if they made it clear that they are registered with the GDC in their surgery. 37% of patients said it would make no difference.

- Two thirds of people who are aged 45-65 say that they are more likely to trust their dental professional if their GDC registration was clearly displayed.
- There is a trend by social group, whereby people in social group AB are more likely than those in group DE to say that this would make them more likely to trust their dental professional – 65% and 54% respectively.
- People in Scotland (66%) are most likely to say they would be more likely to trust their dentist, this compares to 51% of people in Wales who say the same.

22. If more likely, how would you like to see this displayed? (multiple response)

People who are more likely to trust a dental practitioner who displays their GDC registration were asked how they would like to see this displayed.

The chart below demonstrates that most people would like to see GDC registration displayed in the waiting room (50%) or a certificate or sticker in the practice (46%).

One in four people would like to see it displayed in the consultation room and one in five on the practice website.

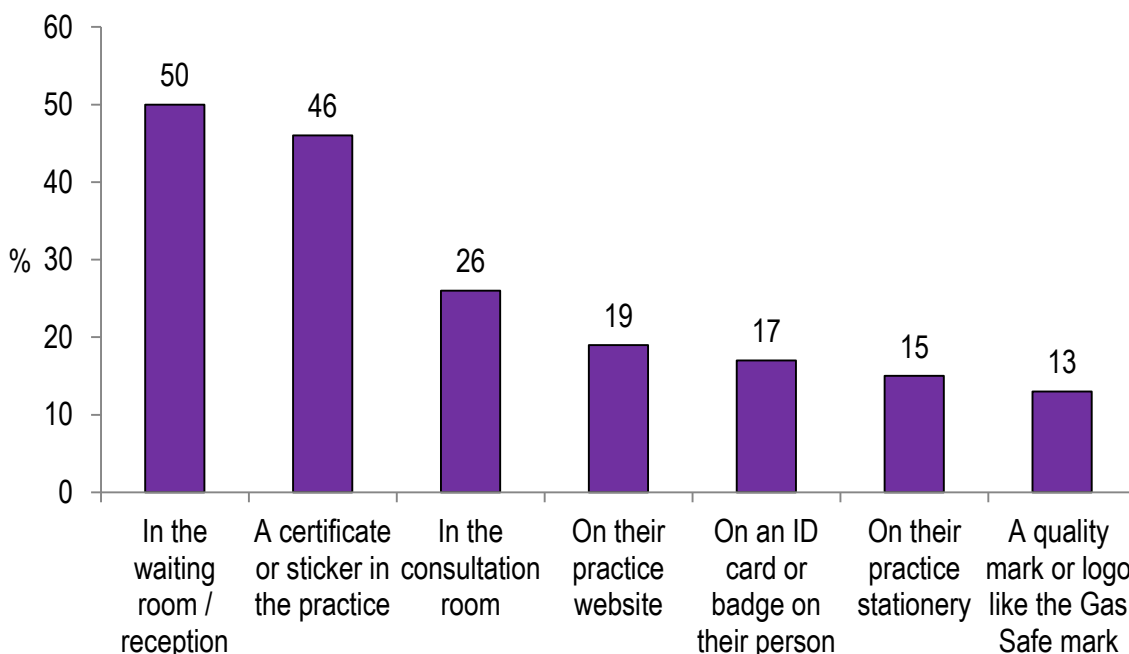


Figure 7.4: Displaying GDC registration

Base: Patients who are more likely to trust their dentist if registration is clear

7.3 Confidence and satisfaction with treatment

23. Now thinking about YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE, how confident or otherwise are you that your dentist/ dental care professional treats YOU fairly?

The majority of patients are very or fairly confident that they are treated fairly by their dentist or dental care professional. 57% of patients say that they are 'very confident' and a further 38% say that they are 'fairly confident'. Just 3% of dental patients are not confident in their practitioner.

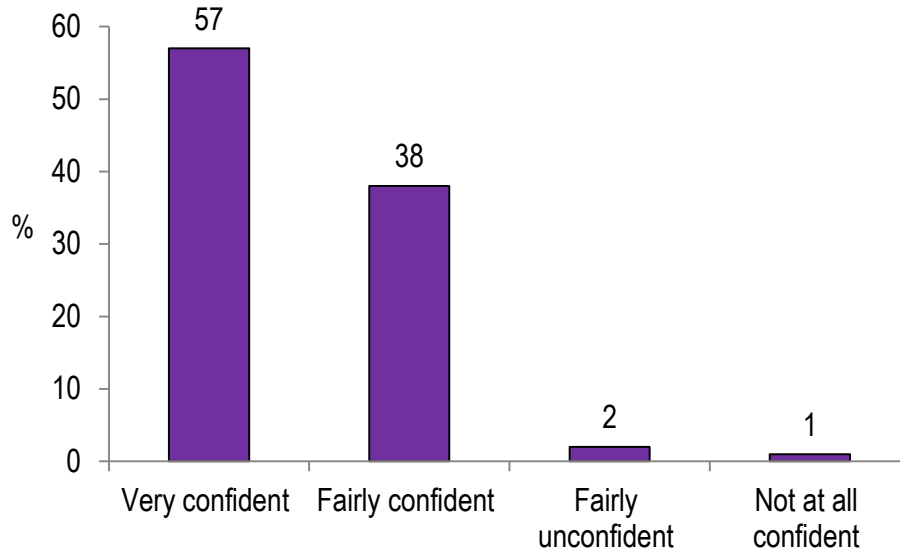


Figure 7.5: Confidence in fair treatment
Base: Patients only

- People aged 25-34 are the age group least likely to be 'very confident' – 48%.
- 64% of patients in Scotland are very confident, which compares to 47% in Wales and 56% in Northern Ireland. This may be an opportunity for further research to understand *why* there are these national differences.
- People who have private treatment are slightly more likely to say that they are 'very confident' than those who receive NHS treatment – 64% and 55% respectively.

24. Now thinking about YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE, how satisfied or otherwise are you with your dental care or treatment?

Similarly, patients were asked how satisfied they are with the treatment that they receive. Fully 95% of patients are very or fairly satisfied with the treatment that they receive. The results are summarised in the chart below.

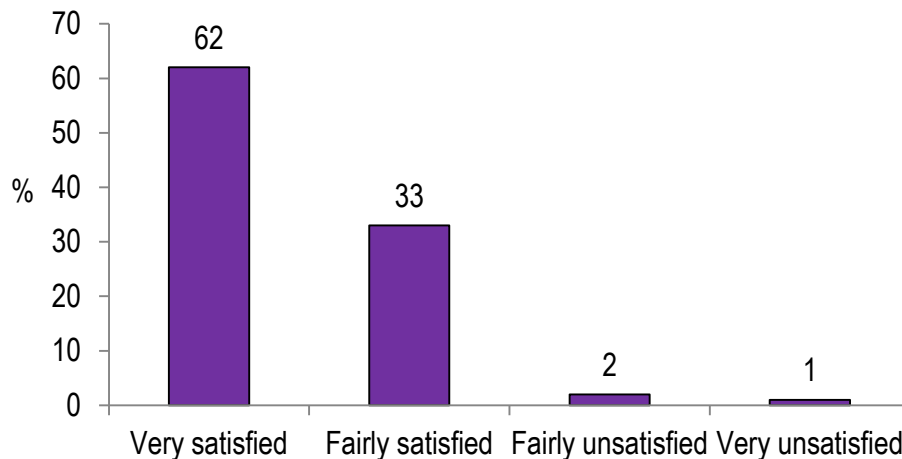


Figure 7.6: Satisfaction with treatment
Base: All Patients

- Interestingly there are some regional differences when it comes to satisfaction in dental treatment. Patients in London area least likely to be ‘very satisfied’ with their treatment (42%), while more than 80% of patients in the West Midlands and in Yorkshire & Humber are ‘very satisfied’. Occasionally we notice lower levels of satisfaction in London, but this is not the case with every sector and so there may be other factors involved as well.

The chart below shows patient attitudes towards confidence and satisfaction with their dental treatment. It is evident that confidence and satisfaction appear to be fairly similar to each other with similar proportions of patients saying they are confident as say they are satisfied.

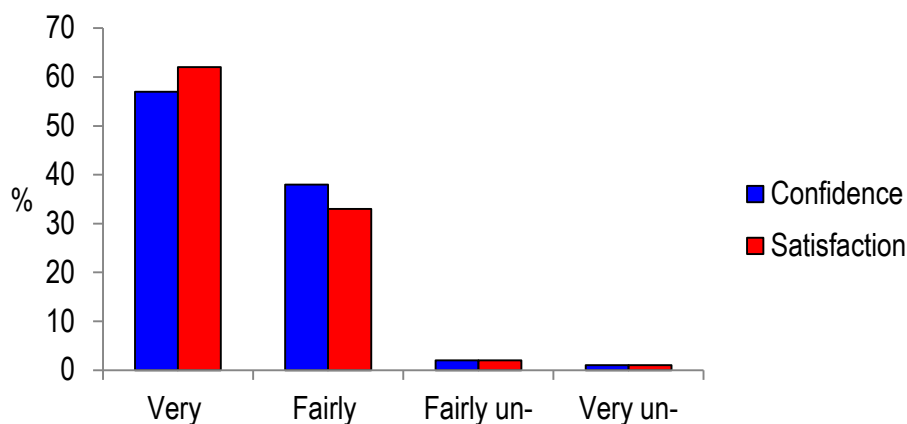


Figure 7.7: Confidence and satisfaction with treatment
Base: All Patients

25. Which of the following reasons, if any, best describe why you are confident in your experience of your dentist or dental care professional? (multiple response)

Encouragingly for the profession, patients cite a number of reasons for their confidence. In particular, the professional’s behaviour and treatment received is the top reason (54%) and the high quality of clinical skills and care (50%) comes in second place.

Overall, the conduct and treatment are more likely to be reasons for confidence than the cost of treatment, although one in five people say that the cost was reasonable and this gave them confidence.

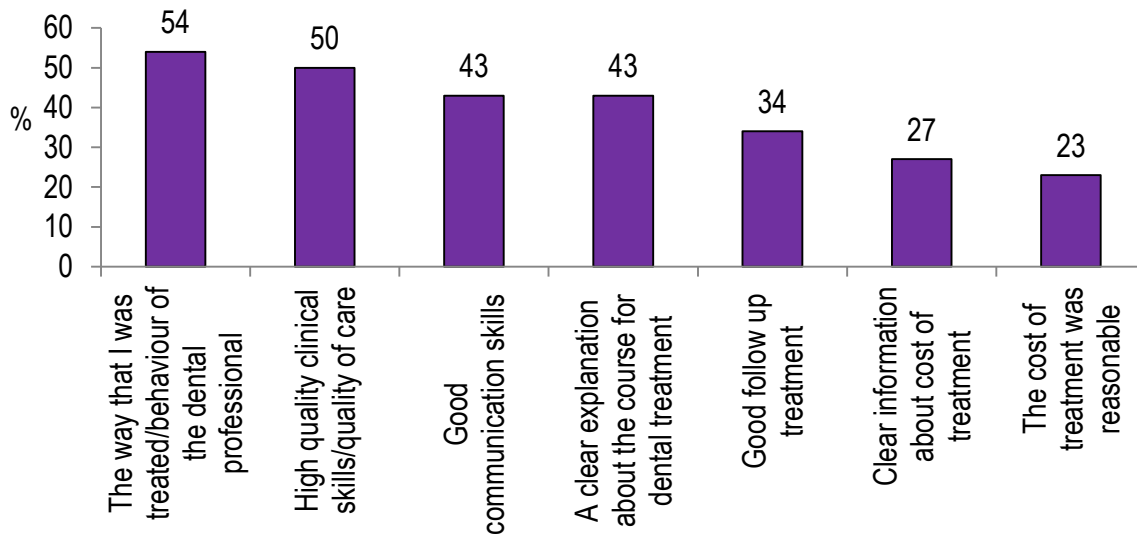


Figure 7.8: Reasons for confidence
Base: All Patients who are confident

Overall these reasons are shared among both private and NHS patients, with the private patients in particular highlighting the high quality of care (57%) and good communication skills (52%) as reasons for confidence.

26. Which of the following reasons if any, best describe why you are not confident in your experience of your dentist or dental care professional? (multiple response)

The chart below shows the reasons why people do not have confidence in their dental practitioner. It is worth highlighting that the sample for this question is small, as few people lack confidence in their dentists or dental care professional.

However, it is worth noting that while cost is unlikely to be a factor in giving confidence, it is clearly a factor in losing confidence. One in three people say that they are not confident in their dentist or dental care professional because of the cost of the treatment. One in four people cite poor quality of care and one in five say that the information on costs or communications were poor.

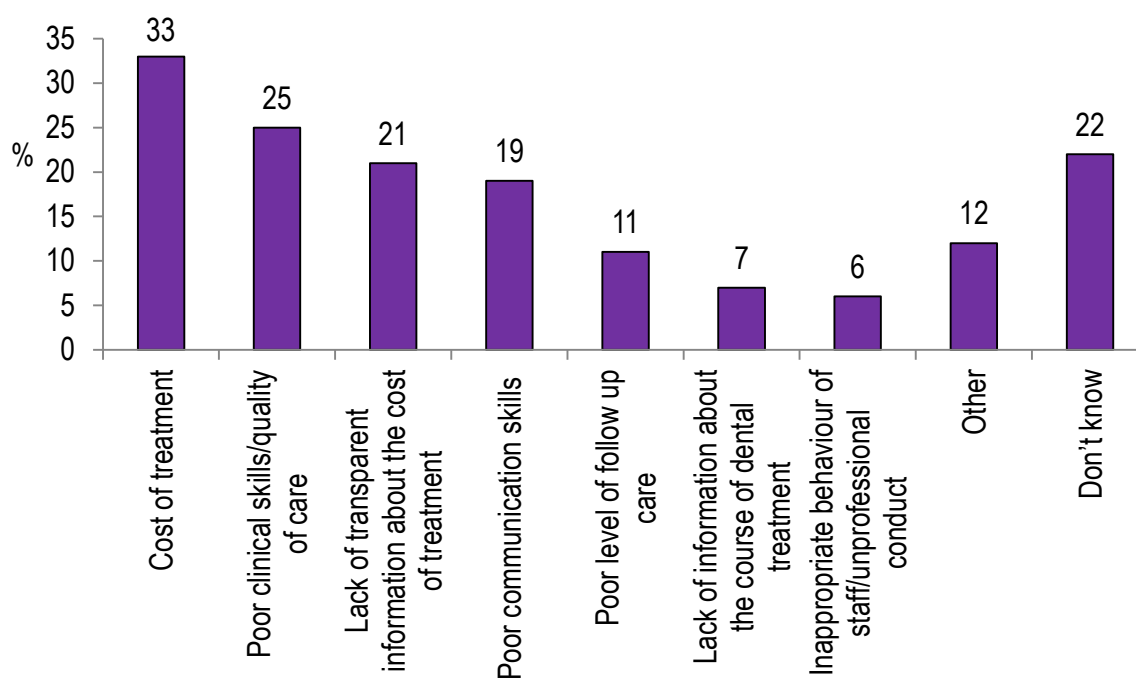


Figure 7.9: Reasons for lack of confidence
Base: All Patients who are not confident

SECTION EIGHT: DENTAL INDEMNITY & REFERRALS

8.1 Dental indemnity

The survey included some questions about dental indemnity. Respondents were informed of the position of the GDC:

“The General Dental Council believes that patients who suffer damage as part of dental treatment should be able to recover any money they spend from the dentist/dental care professional.”

27. Before this survey, were you aware or not that you could recover your costs if you suffer damage during dental treatment?

Two thirds of people (65%) say that they were not aware that they could recover costs if they suffer damage during dental treatment; 30% of people were aware that this was the case. The General Dental Council has as an opportunity here to inform patients and members of the public of this.

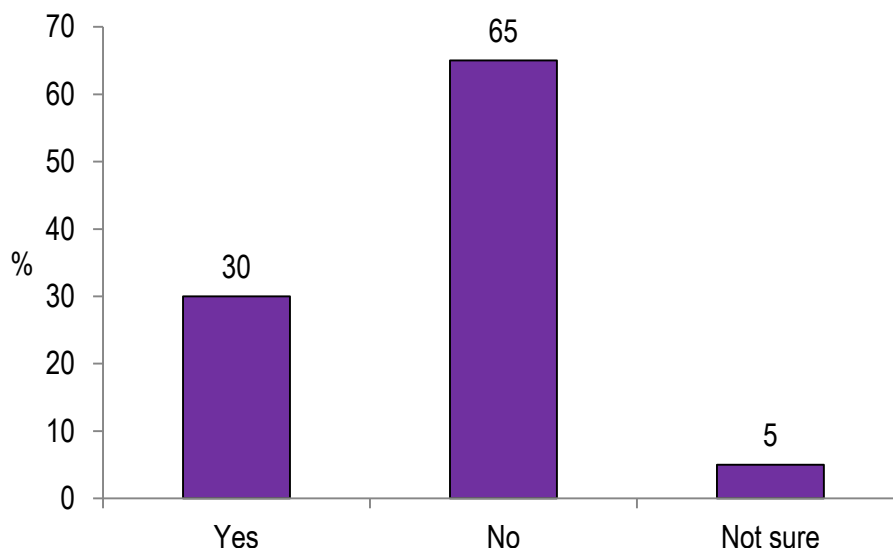


Figure 8.1: Awareness of dental indemnity
Base: Patients only

- Awareness of dental indemnity is lowest in Northern Ireland – where just 17% of patients are aware that they can recover costs if they suffer damage.
- There is some difference between those who have private treatment and those who have NHS treatment. 34% of those receiving private treatment are aware of dental indemnity, compared to 28% of people with NHS treatment.

28. How important or unimportant is it to you that all dentists should be required by law to have insurance cover to ensure that they can settle any recovery cost for claims made against them?

Patients were asked to indicate the level of importance on a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 indicating 'not important' and 10 'very important'. Overall, patients consider this to be very important with an average score of 9.51 out of 10. Indeed, 81% of people think that this is very important, giving a score of 10 out of 10.

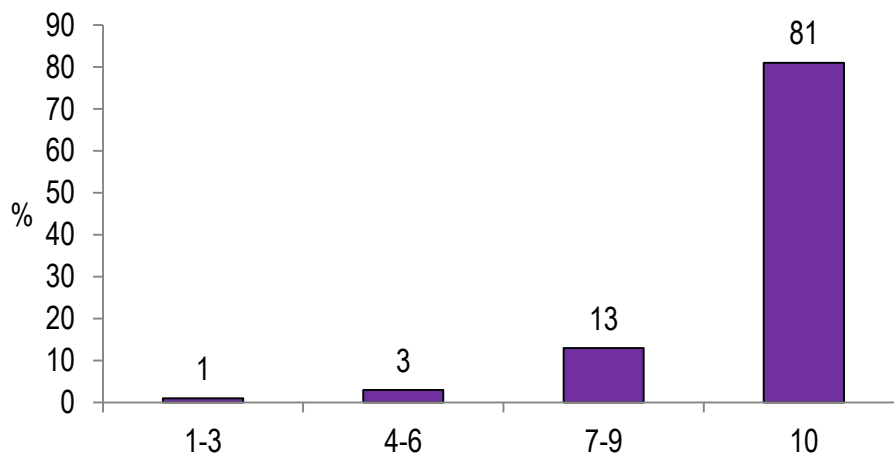


Figure 8.2: Importance of dental indemnity
Base: Patients only

8.2 Direct access to dental professionals

Finally, respondents were asked about their opinions on direct access to dental professionals in place of referrals. Respondents were informed of the current system and were asked whether they would prefer to change it or to maintain the status quo:

“At the moment, only dentists are recognised as being sufficiently trained and competent to diagnose disease and prepare a comprehensive treatment plan for people. If you would like treatment by a trained dental professional, other than a dentist (for example a dental hygienist or therapist), you need to be referred by your dentist first.”

29. Would you prefer to be able to go straight to a dental professional yourself without being referred by a dentist, or do you prefer the current system which requires a referral?

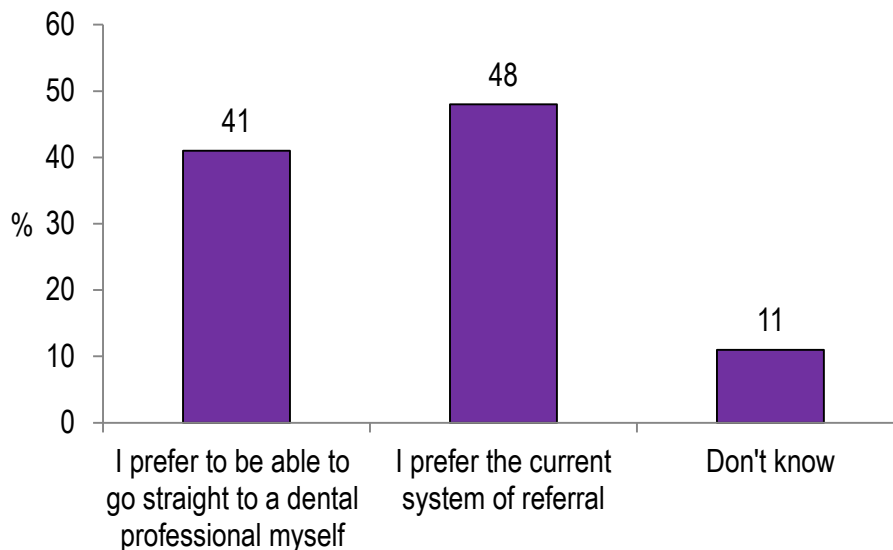


Figure 8.3: Access to dental professionals
Base: Patients only

It is evident from the chart above that opinion is split over whether to maintain the current system, or whether people should be able to go straight to another dental professional – 48% and 41% respectively.

30. Can you tell me why you say that?

People who take each of the two positions addressed above were asked why they think this. In each case the top four reasons are given below.

Overall, people who support the status quo believe that the system works well as it is and they have confidence in their dentist's referral. They want to ensure the quality of treatment remains good and so do not see the need for change.

I trust my dentist as the right person to diagnose and decide on treatment before referral	44%
I have always had a referral from a dentist and I don't see any reason to change	28%
I have confidence that the dentist will know the right dental professional in the area to refer me to	17%
I feel I am likely to get the best quality treatment if I get a referral	10%

Figure 8.4: Top reasons for preferring referred access to dental professionals

Base: All patients who prefer the current system

On the other hand, people who would prefer to go directly to a dental professional believe it would be more convenient and would like to make their own choice. They would like to have access to dental professionals like they have to other healthcare professionals.

I should be able to choose my dental care directly without a referral	48%
It is quicker or more convenient	31%
I can consult other health professionals directly, it should be the same for dental professionals	9%
Dental professionals who have the skills, training and knowledge should be able to treat me directly	7%

Figure 8.5: Top reasons for preferring direct access to dental professionals

Base: All patients who prefer to go straight to a dental professional

CONCLUSION

Overall, this reputation audit demonstrates that there is strong public support for regulating dentistry across the UK. However, the public does not have a clear understanding of who is responsible for regulating dental professionals, and overall, people have low levels of awareness of the GDC. There is significant scope for GDC to improve its communications with the general public – both patients and non-patients alike.

In order to help the GDC target its communications, below are key groups who are currently less likely to be aware of the organisation:

- Women are less likely than men to be definitely aware of the GDC.
- Younger age groups (aged 18-44) are less likely than older age groups to be aware of the GDC.
- People in Wales are generally less familiar with the GDC and also less likely to be engaged on a number of other measures than those from other regions. Generally speaking, people in Wales are less likely to be positive about the GDC website and with display of GDC registration.
- Awareness of the GDC is better among people in the South of England than people in the North.
- As may be expected, 27% of patients, compared to 22% of non-patients were definitely or probably aware of the GDC before the survey. People who have recently visited a dentist are more likely to be familiar with regulation generally and the GDC specifically.

Just 11% of people are able to correctly identify the General Dental Council as the body responsible for regulation of dental professionals. Indeed, it is important to note that people currently are most likely to associate the British Dental Association with having responsibility for regulating the profession. With this in mind, the GDC may wish to examine how to address this misconception.

Encouragingly for the GDC, people believe that all of the functions it carries out are important and people are already 'on-side' when it comes to the regulation of dentistry. The GDC has an opportunity to build on this positive base, while ensuring they are seen as the organisation leading on these issues.

Although the public believe that regulation and registration of dentists are important, 44% of dental patients do not check whether their dentist or dental care professional is qualified to treat them - many simply assume that this is they are qualified or take it on trust. The GDC may wish to consider how they can help change patients' behaviour, as well as opinions. Further research using focus groups or quantitative research would enable the GDC to help address these issues.

The most effective way for the General Dental Council to communicate with the public is through providing information in dental surgeries, or through dental professionals themselves. It is evident that there is an opportunity here for the GDC to increase public awareness and understanding of its role through surgeries. Although other media sources (e.g. television and newspapers) are useful in improving awareness, contact through the dental practice or dental professional are likely to be most effective at passing on information to members of the public about both the GDC and the Dental Complaints Service.

The research also shows that good communication with patients, as well as information on treatments and cost are important for patients. Good communication tends to lead to people feeling confident and satisfied in their dental practitioners. Equally if communication is poor, this also affects their perceptions. Focus group work may also be useful for the GDC in developing and honing its messaging and communications strategy.

Appendix: Guidelines for the public use of survey results

ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules (www.britishpollingcouncil.org). This commits us to the highest standards of transparency.

The BPC's rules state that all data and research findings made on the basis of surveys conducted by member organisations that enter the public domain, must include reference to the following:

- The company conducting the research (ComRes)
- The client commissioning the survey
- Dates of interviewing
- Method of obtaining the interviews (e.g. in-person, post, telephone, internet)
- The universe effectively represented (all adults, voters etc)
- The percentages upon which conclusions are based
- Size of the sample and geographic coverage.

Published references (such as a press release) should also show a web address where full data tables may be viewed, and they should also show the complete wording of questions upon which any data that has entered the public domain are based.

All press releases or other publications must be checked with ComRes before use. ComRes requires 48 hours to check a press release unless otherwise agreed.