

Impact of a formal complaint on dentists

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Objective

Patients' complaints can have serious impact on the well-being of dentists. Since little is known about the nature and extent of this impact, the aim of this study was to investigate dentists' experiences in this respect.

Methods

In May 2013 an anonymous survey was sent out to all 955 dentists and dental specialists, against whom between 2008 and mid-2013 a formal complaint was lodged at the Complaints Committee of the Royal Dutch Dental Association (KNMT). 413 (43%) of them responded. As for gender, age, place of qualification and the way the complaint was handled this research group proved to be representative for the population of dentists and dental specialists invited. The data was analyzed using SPSS.

Results

- 51% of the respondents reported that the complaint was successfully mediated, while 17% stated that the patient had withdrawn the complaint. From the remaining complaints handled by the Central Complaints Committee, 13% was (partial) substantiated, 17% was not substantiated and 2% was settled (Figure 1).
- 71% of the respondents reported that the formal complaint had influenced their professional practice (Figure 2a). The top five ways in which a complaint affected the personal professional practicing of these respondent are shown in Figure 2b.
- 52% of the respondents reported that the formal complaint had had an effect on their attitude towards colleagues and patients (Figure 3a). For the top five ways in which a complaint had had an effect on their attitude towards colleagues and patients see Figure 3b.
- 60% of the respondents reported that they had experienced an impact on their mental and/or physical well-being (Figure 4a). Figure 4b shows the top five ways in which a complaint influenced the mental and/or physical well-being of these respondents.
- The severity of the impact appeared to be related to the outcome of the procedure.
- A three-quarter majority (75%) stated that due to the complaint the treatment relationship with the patient was terminated.
- Most respondents (64%) intended to be more alert with regard to their professional practice.

Figure 1

The way a patients' complaint against a dentist was handled

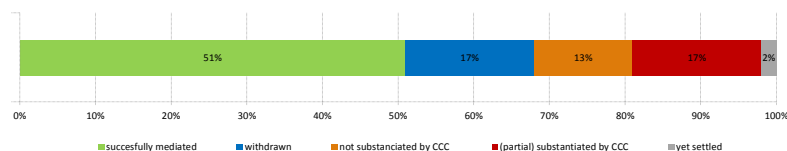
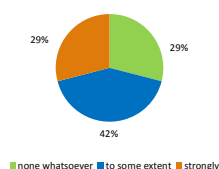


Figure 2a

Extent to which a complaint affected the personal professional practicing of dentists (n=409)



■ none whatsoever ■ to some extent ■ strongly

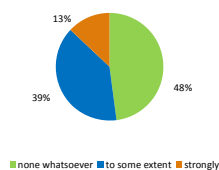
Figure 2b

'Top five ways' in which a complaint affected the personal professional practicing of dentists (n=291)

- the complaint was a signal to improve/do things differently ('wake-up call')	39%
- the complaint was a blemish on my good reputation as a dentist	35%
- during treatment I started frequent 'checking and double checking'	20%
- the complaint felt like a personal let-down	17%
- I became unsure of my professional functioning	17%

Figure 3a

Extent to which a complaint influenced the attitude c.q. the feeling of dentists towards patients, colleagues and/or members of staff (n=409)



■ none whatsoever ■ to some extent ■ strongly

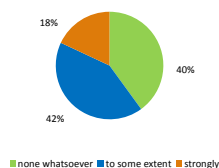
Figure 3b

'Top five ways' in which a complaint influenced the attitude/feeling of dentists towards patients, colleagues and/or members of staff (n=213)

- I started seeing every (new) patient as a possible risk	44%
- the complaint has taught me to recognize patients' dissatisfaction earlier	29%
- I became more reserved when dealing with (certain/similar) patients	28%
- I left dealing with certain patients to colleagues or associates, if possible	9%
- I tried to recognize risky patients better (contact, treatment)	5%

Figure 4a

Extent to which a complaint influenced the mental and/or physical well-being of dentists (n=409)



■ none whatsoever ■ to some extent ■ strongly

Figure 4b

'Top five ways' in which a complaint influenced the mental and/or physical well-being of dentists (n=248)

- I had feelings of anger and/or aggression	53%
- I felt powerless	47%
- I had sleep disorders	26%
- I became suspicious of other people	20%
- I felt (continually) scared, tense or tired/stressed	19%

Conclusions

For most dentists a patient's formal complaint had a serious impact, both on a professional level and in respect to their mental and/or physical well-being. However, the impact was not mere negative. A major part of the respondents considered the complaint also to be a signal to tackle things better, in particular with regard to patient communication.