

Engaging with the media

It's a normal day in your place of work when, all of a sudden, your receptionist receives a call from a journalist.

They're working on a story where one of your patients is alleging poor treatment and the journalist asks for you to comment on the matter. They tell you their deadline is lunchtime.

What should you do?

- Don't panic – the deadline is the journalist's problem and there's no pressure to respond immediately
- Get the journalist's details, including who they work for and their contact numbers
- Avoid being drawn into a discussion, as it's likely anything you say - even conversationally - will be "on the record"
- Use the steps in this guidance to ensure the issue is dealt with effectively and professionally.

When might you be approached by the media?

In addition to the scenario above, you might also be approached by the media if:

- You have been asked to attend a General Medical Council (GMC) or General Dental Council (GDC) hearing
- You are giving evidence at a coroner's inquest or fatal accident inquiry
- You have a high profile or celebrity client, and the media is looking for information about the treatment you have offered
- One of your patients has agreed to speak in a media article or a TV programme about the healthcare treatment they have received
- You have been an expert witness in a court case or inquiry
- A journalist wants to quote you as "an expert".

What should you do?

As a medical or dental professional, your duty to maintain patient confidentiality is paramount. This is set out for medical professionals in the GMC guidance *Confidentiality: responding to criticism in the media*, and for dental professionals under Standard 4.2 and 9.1.3 of the GDC's *Standards for the Dental Team*.

In practice, this means that while patients are free to share details of their treatment with the media, there are higher standards put in place by regulators for healthcare professionals.

While it can be tempting to engage with the media, especially if you are concerned that your patient may not have represented the details of your treatment wholly and accurately, any response you provide to journalists should be limited to explaining your duty of patient confidentiality.

It's also worth bearing in mind that even confirming that someone is a patient of yours may breach your legal and ethical obligations.

Keeping your interactions with the press to a minimum and restricting any response to explaining your duty of confidentiality will ensure you handle press enquiries within regulatory guidelines.

It's also important to remain professional in all dealings with the media.

The GMC's *Good medical practice* states that doctors should "act with integrity" and "maintain patient confidentiality" when communicating publicly, including speaking to and writing in the media. Similarly, Standard 9.1 of *Standards for the dental team* states that "You must ensure that your conduct, both at work and in your personal life, justifies patients' trust in you and the public's trust in the dental profession".

I'm concerned the media have sent a photographer to take my picture – what should I do?

1. Try not shield your face or otherwise appear to avoid a photographer taking your picture. This can have the unintended consequence of making you appear to have something to hide
2. Simply allow the photographer to take a picture, but if you feel physically intimidated by them or they injure you, then call 999
3. Photographers can legally take photographs from any public place but must respect the confidentiality of patients
4. If you allow a photographer into your premises, ensure you remove any reference to patients or passwords/login details from desks and walls.

MDDUS support

If you are approached by a journalist wishing to discuss a matter in which MDDUS is already involved, get in touch with us for assistance. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with us to discuss any areas of professional concern, by telephone on 0333 043 4444, or by email at advice@mddus.com

Further guidance

1. GMC – *Good medical practice – professionalism in action*
<https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/good-medical-practice/professionalism-in-action>

2. GMC – Confidentiality – responding to criticism in the media
<https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/confidentiality---responding-to-criticism-in-the-media>
3. GDC – Standards for the dental team
<https://standards.gdc-uk.org/Assets/pdf/Standards%20for%20the%20Dental%20Team.pdf>