



Working Paper ERO WG “Liberal Dental Practice”:

Liberal dental practice in practice partnerships, practice networks and medical care units

In many countries a trend towards cooperation among dentists has grown considerably. The reasons for different forms of dental practice partnerships lie in the demand for state-of-the-art facilities, professional further education, social changes of different ways of life and not least of all because of the feminisation within the dental profession.

Latest innovative forms of dental practice are for example:

- Practice sharing as partners with equal rights
- Practice sharing with different professional disciplines
- Job-sharing practices
- Practices sharing staff and equipment
- Practice clinics
- Dental public limited companies
- Practices based on the franchise model
- Practices in cooperation with external companies
- Medical care units of health insurance funds
- Branch practices abroad

Despite the large benefits that some new forms of practice sharing show, there is some danger to the liberal dental practice that cannot be ignored.

We are more and more faced with the following question:

Will a liberal dental practice in practice partnerships, practice networks and medical care units be guaranteed?

With the increase of liberal dental practice with freedom of choosing an occupation, it is strongly recommended not to put up for negotiation liberal, self-reliant dental activities of the individual within the various forms of cooperation.

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The following must therefore be guaranteed:

- Free choice of dental practitioners and an uninfluenced dentist-patient relationship
- An independent and uninfluenced dentist-patient relationship
- Not being subject to directives to assure freedom of therapy
- No interference by any third parties like cost units and health insurance funds
- No decision on a therapy due to the interests of higher-level shareholders
- The “health care market” should not be subject to generally applicable, market policy-related principles; it constitutes a particularity and consequently is subject to specific rules
- New forms of practice partnerships must not allow any structures of economic profit orientation to be incorporated into dental care; through price dumping and bonus-malus regulations, these structures entail the risk of accepting a loss of quality.
- A discussion has to be initiated raising the question to what extent an interference of any third party interested in participating is legitimate
- Furthermore, it is still to be discussed if dental practice partnerships should only be run under a dentist’s supervision.

In a special role are dentists employed in dental practice partnership.

Because for financial reasons, for minimization of risk and for compatibility of family and work, not every newly qualified dentist wants to work in a practice of his or her own but continue working in a practice as employee on a monthly salary. Thus, a division of labour by means of complementary working hours is possible. Moreover, work splitting by providing different core areas and mutual complement through specialization might be conceivable.

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Therefore

- Assistants play a special role. It has to be considered to be a particular form of liberal dental practice.
- Inevitably, this leads to some kind of dependency due to being bound by the directives of the owner or leader of the practice.
- There is a dependence governed by special rules: on the one hand there is the dependence by directives, on the other by the employee's responsibility for dental treatment.
- Therefore exists a small but important difference between ownership and liberal dental practice in therapy
- The "right to say NO" shall urgently be called for.

These claims are underpinned by the "Charta for Liberal Professions" adopted by the CED in November 2012 comprising the following statements:

- Liberal professionals are independent: Liberal professions are independent in their area of expertise and from the interests of third parties and carry out their professions autonomously. They are independent in arriving their judgment and in performing their individualized service and bear full responsibility for their actions.
- Liberal professions perform their services personally: Liberal professions provide their services for their clients personally. They are only able to delegate a small part of these services to less qualified persons. This is because liberal professional services are very closely related to the liberal professionals themselves, with their knowledge, expertise and creativity.

Only under those principles, a liberal dental practice provided by practice partnerships in various ways can be guaranteed.

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The above mentioned claims and questions were discussed during the meetings of the ERO WG “Liberal Dental Practice” in Geneva February 2015 and in Tbilisi April 2015 resulting in the following conclusion:

For reasons of modern qualification profiles, new forms of dental practice partnerships are to be feared. However, as reflected in the ‘Charta for Liberal Professions’, the liberal dental practice should remain the main feature of dental work.

Even if working as an employee, there must not arise any fundamental contradiction to those principles. This requires special attention so that the principles of liberal dental practice and dental ethics will not be destroyed due to economic interests, state constraints and primarily financially rewarding practice management.

Hence, it is absolutely necessary to permanently adjust the new forms of professional practice to our ethic principles and to the ones of the liberal professions and review to ensure if they are justifiable. Only on the basis of freedom of liberal dental practice, trust and responsibility, conscientious dental practice incorporated into new innovative forms of professional practice can also be guaranteed.

Therefore, the ERO working group “Liberal Dental Practice” is called upon to observe the latest forms of dental practice and to draft an adequate statement and a ‘Code of Ethics’ should be considered the basic principle also for a dental practice partnership.

And in particular, the ideas and visions of the younger generation should be taken into consideration because they are the ones who are faced with those new forms of professional practice in future.

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