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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PATIENT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION FOR DENTISTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to highlight the importance of patient management for dental professionals and thus making it a necessity in the regular dental curriculum. By finding the importance of patient management, we improve the communication skills of a dentist towards a patient and thereby creating a healthy professional and humanitarian relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

Patient management is one of the key components in any health profession especially in one as professional as dentistry. A dentist-patient relationship can only work if there is good communication between them. Therefore, a profound understanding on the effectiveness of communication skills is significant in aiding the obtainment of a patient's informed consent, when handling patients that have a diverse cultural background and even dealing with anxieties or events that arise from different forms of dental treatment. Traditionally, as a dental student, they are assessed based on their ability to find and retain facts. As the years have gone by, interpersonal communication has been a very important part for any dental education. However, despite the growing awareness of the importance in communication skills, the reality of what is practised in dental school is different. Based on a study that was conducted by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), it was concluded that the difficulty in rebuilding the dental curriculum is not that there is limited agreement on the need for change but there is an impediment in overcoming the barriers to change. The dental curriculum at this stage is full of repeating or only slightly useful learning materials.

As a result, dental students have only a margin of time to fully develop their patient management skills throughout their dental education years (Field, 1995). The main idea of building a profound dentist-patient skill is to build a strong base of communication. With good communication between the two parties, handling of the patient will be easy as well as the process of receiving treatment from the professional.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In about 100 dental professionals, both males and females were given a questionnaire each regarding their opinions about patient management education for future dentists in all of the departments at Saveetha Dental College and Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India during the year of 2015. The questionnaire was distributed to three groups of dental professionals that include; interns, postgraduates as well as dentists in Saveetha Dental College. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions that would require the participant to share their experience both during dental school and throughout their years of dental practice. Data was then collected for each of the questions and the results were then discussed in detail.

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The format of the questionnaire is as shown below:

<u>PATIENT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION FOR DENTISTS</u>	
<i>Dear Sir/Madam/Miss,</i>	
This questionnaire is being done to collect data about whether or not patient management skills should be included in the dental curriculum. Please answer the following questions below in the spaces provided. Your participation is highly appreciated!	
<u>AGE:</u>	<u>GENDER:</u> M / F
1. Are you a/an	
a) academician b) practitioner c) consultant	
2. How long have you been treating patients?	

3. What type of patients do you treat? Children or adults?	

4. Are communication skills important as a dentist? Yes/No.	

5. How did you get into the groove of communicating with patients? Were you taught or did you learn during practice?	

6. Have you been able to communicate with your patients well? Yes/No.	

7. What is the basic difficulty you have faced in treating a patient?	

8. Have patients appreciated your communication skills?	

9. Do you still experience problems when you're dealing with patients? If so, please state.	

10. What is your opinion on making patient management skills a part of the dental curriculum?	

OBSERVATION AND RESULTS

There were 100 questionnaires distributed and analysed throughout this survey. The results represent the responses of the dental practitioners in Saveetha Dental College. Of all the 100 respondents, 53 were males and 47 were females. The majority of the dental professions were at an age range of 30-39 (47%); it also includes ages of 20-29 (42%), 40-49 (6%) and 50-59 (5%).

The Role of Dental Practitioners

According to the survey, about 35% of the respondents are practitioners and 24% are academicians; and this constitutes most of the dental professionals of the college. The remaining are consultants (10%), both academicians and practitioner (9%), both academician and consultant (3%), both consultant

and practitioner (4%) as well as the ones that play all three roles (5%).

Duration of Treating Patients

Experience wise; the duration in years of treating patients is the highest in the range of 1-5 years. Since the age range of the practitioners are the most amongst 20-29 years olds, it is understandable that about 50% of the dentists have 1-5 years of experience in treating patients. Dental practitioners that have more than 16 years of experience are only limited to 7% of the respondents and it is followed by 8% for 11-15 years as well as 3% for 6-10 years.

Types of Patients Treated

When asked about the type of patients that they are more focused on; approximately 43% carry out treatments on both

adults and children. Dental professionals that carry out treatments solely on adults is about 40% while those that treat only childrens are of 17%.

Importance & Development of Communication Skills

One thing that all 100 of the respondents agree upon is that communication skills are important. In terms of the development of their communication skills, they are asked to choose between two options; which is either through teaching in the dental curriculum or by continuous practice during clinicals. Though about 75% learnt it through ongoing practice, 10% were taught in learning while 15% agreed that both ways helped in the development of their patient management skills. As a result, about 95% can confidently say that they are able to communicate with patients well while the remaining 5% are not able to properly communicate with the patients.

Difficulties of Dentist-Patient Communication

Based on each person's opinion, they were asked to state some basic difficulties when communicating with patients. A majority of them have stated that unresponsive patients is the major difficulty that they have faced throughout their clinical years. Some also say that language could be a problem especially in terms of international dentist that can only communicate in English. The fear that the patient also experience have been a problem during the execution of treatments as it may prevent the procedures to be done smoothly and successfully.

Patient Appreciation

At the end of the treatment, a large portion of the patients have appreciated the communication between the patient and dentist throughout the procedure. This statement is supported by about 90%; where it was clear that the patient has been able to withdraw the communication barrier between them. With only 10% of them who have not truly understood what the dentists have been telling them.

Ongoing Problems Still Faced

Regardless of the experience that these professionals have, about 17% of them still undergo some form of problem during practice. However, at about 83%, they have successfully managed to stay clear of such problems during treatment of patients.

Opinion of Patient Management in Curriculum

Based on these dental professionals own opinion, about 90% of them concluded that patient management skills should definitely be introduced and implemented in the dental curriculum. An estimation of about 10% of them think that it is not needed and the dental curriculum would work just fine without it.

DISCUSSION

The dental curriculum is constantly changing throughout the years. It has undergone evolution until it has reached a point where the curriculum has included many different programs regarding psychology. Based on the surveys that were conducted in the institution, it was clear that patient management is an important component of any dental practice.

This project was designed in such a way that it aims to find out as well as assess what are the thoughts of dental professionals on including a proper patient management course in the dental curriculum.

The Role of Dental Practitioners

As a dentist, there are three major roles that they play. It can either be a practitioner, a consultant or an academician. Based on the survey, about 35% of the respondents are solely practitioners. While the second most are academicians at about 24%. This result shows that most of the dentist in Saveetha are practicing dentist and some are still in the midst of either completing their degree or post graduate studies.

Duration of Treating Patients

In regards of the experience, these dental professionals at the highest, about 50% of them have an average of 1-5 years of clinical practice. This finding can be associated with the age group of these professionals since most of them are of an age range of 30-39.

Types of Patients Treated

The patients that are being treated by these dentist includes both generation; childrens and adults. At about 43%, the dentists have experienced treating dental related problems that specifically is done for both generations.

Importance & Development of Communication Skills

It is agreeable that communication skills is of main importance in any dental practice being done. Since, with proper communication between them, will there only be success in the treatment. In terms of the way of developing these skills, 75% have developed them by solely on practice without being theoretically taught. This explains how with continuous practice throughout the course of their dental school years, a proper way of communicating with the patients is developed.

Difficulties of Dentist-Patient Communication

When asked about the basic difficulties faced in treating patients, a vast majority of these dentist have stated about the lack of response from the patient during treatment. This may be the result of lack of knowledge of dental hygiene or some psychological problems, mainly like fear.

Patient Appreciation

In every dental treatment, the feedback of the patient is the most important part. The experience of the patient can be seen as a critical approach of how to improve a dentist's way of treating patients. 90% have stated that the patients have definitely appreciated the treatment that had been given. The remaining 10% did not seem to appreciate some of the dentist's work and this may be due to either the quality of the treatment or even just the patient's psychological thoughts on the treatment.

Ongoing Problems Still Faced

On an average, 83% percent have stated that there are no ongoing problems that they experience when treating the patient. However, the remaining 17% may have problems that

cannot be avoided since some of the treatments have not fully gone entirely smooth.

Opinion of Patient Management in Curriculum

A large portion (90%) of the respondents gave a very positive feedback on the implementation of patient management skills in the dental curriculum. They have stated that it can be a very useful approach for future dentist especially before the stage of clinical practice as this may ease the process of communication. However, a small fraction (10%) have stated that it may not be necessary as through prolonged practice, it will develop on its own.

Conclusion

Overall, based on this study, it shows that making patient management as a part of the curriculum has gotten positive feedback from the practitioners that have gone through the course themselves. At the end of the day, dental institutions seek the main goal of producing a dentist that has the ability of relating, understanding and communicating effectively with their patients. Though a vast majority of the professionals have only learnt of managing patients during practice and with no form of specific teaching, they still thought that the approach is a good way of further developing a potential dental practitioner's communication skill. Even with years of experience, some still have problems regarding patient management. Thus, in order to decrease the problems though not entirely creating a problem-free environment, including this form of teaching in the curriculum would surely help achieve this goal. As both theory and practice go hand in hand, a better form of understanding on how to handle patients beforehand can help ease the process of treating patients during clinical practice.

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