

NEWLY ADMITTED DENTAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT IDEAL QUALITIES OF DENTAL PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the perceptions of the newly admitted dental students about the attributes of an ideal dental professional, the difficulties faced in maintaining these ideal attributes, and the strategies they can employ to counter these difficulties.

Study Design: Qualitative research methodology in constructivist paradigm was used.

Place and Duration of Study: Fatima Memorial Hospital College of Medicine & Dentistry, Lahore, Pakistan, from Jun 2015 to Aug 2015.

Methodology: The study was conducted during the orientation session of newly inducted Bachelors of Dental Surgery 1st year class. Written responses to questions about the objectives were posed to all the students. Qualitative thematic analysis of the data collected was done based on priori themes, and trends were identified in the current study. Conclusions were made through an iterative process and member checking.

Results: Sixty-six out of 75 students responded with a response rate of 80%. They identified integrity, humane-ness and good communication skills as important ideals in a professional dentist. They highlighted that due to the difficulty to satisfy every patient, and the exhaustive nature of the profession, dentists might lose their humility. Constantly revisiting their ideals, and the determination to follow them were identified as most important means to ensure retention of these ideals through the undergraduate education.

Conclusion: Freshly inducted students have strong ideals including integrity, compassion, altruism and excellence. There is a need for formal professionalism curriculum to reinforce these.

Keywords: Cynicism in dental students, Dentistry, Dental students, Professionalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Healthcare profession has developed over many centuries and a typical healthcare professional's role has gradually evolved from a 'healer' in the past to a 'biomedical scientist' in the current state of profession¹. This in turn has led to incorporation of 'professionalism' as a core competency for medical professionals in the late 90s and early 21st century by ACGME and Can MEDS^{2,3}. The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) has described six values that define professionalism in dentistry. These values are identified as competence, fairness, integrity, responsibility, respect and service mindedness⁴. The western world has incorporated teaching of 'professionalism' almost two decades ago, but there is still a need for introduction of a formal

curriculum to teach professionalism in the local Pakistani context in most of the institutions⁵, and professionalism training is informal and relies heavily on hidden curriculum⁶.

The process of professionalism development over the years of undergraduate education⁷, described as proto-professionalism, has two opposing dimensions. The newly inducted medical students start with naivety and idealism they have been aspiring for. With exposure and experience this naivety on one hand transforms into practical wisdom (Phronesis), whereas idealism becomes cynicism (fig-1) with repeated inappropriate exposure during the process of professional development. This study is based on this concept of proto-professionalism (fig-1)⁸.

Undergraduate students employ multiple learning strategies to acquire professionalism, however, it still remains to be figured out what is the starting point, and what are the standards

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that the newly entering students already have in their mind as to what a professional should be? These baseline ideals have been identified in the western⁹ and Arab¹⁰ world as the starting point for professionalism curriculum, however, there has been no such effort in Pakistan. Similarly, Professionalism as a competency has numerous aspects that have very strong underpinnings on local social values^{11,12}. The exact definitions of these values/enabling competencies, and the identification of appropriate learning strategies for each of these needs an in-depth research of the ideals that the students have set in their minds even before the start of undergraduate education. At the same time it has been reported in the literature that there is need to safeguard against development of cynicism during undergraduate dental education^{13,14}.

This research was planned to establish the basis on which formal professionalism curriculum may be developed because the local literature lacks information about the above mentioned. The 'ideal attributes' that the students think that a dental professional should have were identified, along with the difficulties that the students feel they will face due to which they may lose these ideals. It was further explored how the students feel they can keep up these ideals.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology in constructivist paradigm was used. First year BDS students were required to attend a mandatory session on 'professionalism' during the orientation week. Non probability convenience sampling was done and all students present at the session were requested to respond to the open ended questions. The question sheet gave the rationale for the study, and students were advised to answer only if they are willing to participate in the study. Permission was taken from the Principal to conduct the research prior to the session. No ethics issues were identified in this study nor highlighted by the gatekeeper.

The following questions were asked sequentially at appropriate times during this interactive session. The questions posed were:

- What ideal qualities do you see in an ideal professional (dentist)?
- Which of these ideal qualities do you feel are unachievable?
- How do you think you can keep up your ideals?

Students were asked to give written responses to the above-mentioned queries. Responses to each question were grouped for data analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis was done based on priori themes⁹ and trends identified in the current study. Conclusions were made through an iterative process of revisiting research questions and student responses by both the authors thus validating the inferences (member checking).

RESULTS

A total of 66 [females = 51 (77.3%), males = 15 (22.7%)] students out of the class strength of 75 responded (response rate=88%). The handwritten responses were transformed in to Ms Word files

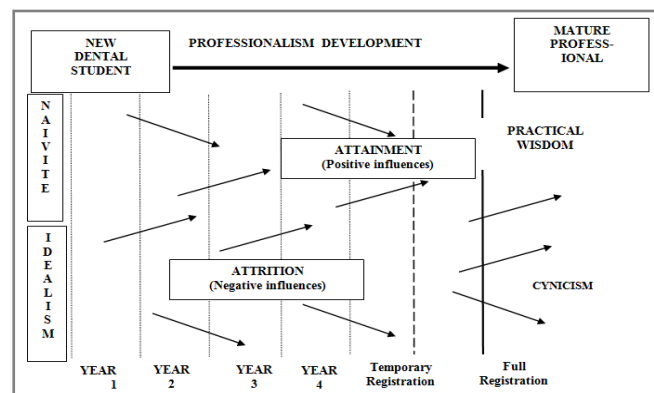


Figure-1: Model for Professionalism Development from dental student to mature professional. Source: Adapted from and used by permission of Hilton S, 2007 (8).

format and frameworks for each question were developed. Piori themes were identified as reported in the literature⁹:

- Integrity
- Compassion
- Altruism

- Continuous improvement
- Excellence

Table-I: What ideal qualities do you see in an ideal professional (dentist)?

Priori Themes	Trends	Quotes	
		Number	Verbatim
Integrity	Honest	13	"Honest to profession and patient"
	Punctual	5	"Be punctual"
	Trustworthy	1	"Trustworthy"
Compassion	Humane	13	"First priority must be to serve humanity"
	Hard working	4	"Hard worker and Passionate"
	Responsible	5	"Very responsible"
Altruism	Welcoming	5	"Welcoming nature and humanity"
	God Fearing	1	"Strong faith". "Fear of Allah"
	Good listener	3	"Should be friendly and should listen to patient queries"
	Ethical	8	"Earning must be through lawful/ Islamic means"
	Good communication skills	10	"Skills to communicate"
Continuous improvement	Business minded	1	"First of all anyone agrees or not earning is a big factor"
	None	None	None
Excellence	Skilled	8	"Ability to treat patient efficiently"
	Knowledgeable	5	"Should have proper knowledge and understanding of what he is doing"
	Competent	1	"Competent"

Table-II: Which of the ideal qualities the students felt were unachievable?

Priori Themes	Trends	Quotes	
		Number	Verbatim
Integrity	Sincerity to patients	5	"Preferential treatment of relatives"
	Humbleness	7	"After a level of work doctor gets exhausted and irritated and loses patience and they treat patients as their work but don't see them as humans"
	Punctuality	1	"In Pakistan specially the ideal professional can't achieve quality, be sincere to profession and punctual"
Compassion	None	None	None
Altruism	Serving humanity selflessly	2	"A dentist should serve the humanity first than to be money oriented but it is practically difficult"
	Work life balance	2	"Choosing profession over family is difficult"
	Being empathetic instead of sympathetic	1	"It is impossible to keep the patient's emotions separated from yours at all times"
Continuous improvement	None	None	None
Excellence	Satisfying every patient	7	"Dentistry is kind of technical profession. One may find it difficult to be a perfect dentist who can satisfy each patient"
	Mastering the profession in all respects		"We could not master in every field"
	Skills		"You cannot achieve skill you are naturally born with it"
Non Respondents	27		

Trends were identified that would fall in to the above-mentioned priori themes. Table-I to III present the answers to the questions with examples of statements as verbatim in tables.

DISCUSSION

Priori themes of integrity, compassion, altruism excellence and continuous learning have been identified in the literature and used in this study⁹. It is noteworthy that young undergraduate students could identify dimensions like integrity, compassion, altruism and excellence as important qualities of a professional dentist. It is important that these ideals should be preserved through formal acquisition of professionalism

students identified business mindedness as an important trait of professional dentists. It has been debated that dentistry is not just a profession, but also a trade^{9,13,16}. Accordingly, there is a need to incorporate knowledge and practices of fair trade in BDS curriculum^{9,16}.

Lastly, it was noticeable from the results that students could identify the possibility of losing their ideals over the period of undergraduate education. In order to avoid that from happening, they could further identify the continuous need to revisit their ideals (12 quotes). Determination, fear of God and sincerity to the profession were further highlighted as measures to ensure long-term retention of ideals. The professionalism

Table-III: How the students thought they could keep up their ideals?

Piori Themes	Trends	Quotes	
		Number	Verbatim
Integrity	Being sincere	5	“We can keep our ideals with our sincerity, determination and motivation”
Compassion	Determination	17	“All we have to do is to stay determined to our profession we should treat the patients as we want our parents to be treated by any dentist”
Altruism	Fearing God	5	“We can maintain our good qualities by fear of Allah in order to be respected you have to respect others”
	Keeping balance in life	1	“Balance in life by never giving up”
Excellence	None	None	None
Continuous improvement	Looking up to past achievers (inspiration)	4	“We should be looking up to the young and brilliant minds who could achieve so much in young age they were students like us too. Why cant we if they could?”
	Revisiting the ideals regularly	12	“Writing the qualities on a piece of paper and paste it somewhere you can see it whenever you leave for work”
	Reflection		“Trying to learn from our failures”

over the years of undergraduate education. Absence of such measures would lead to a loss of these ideals and development of cynicism (fig-1)⁸.

The students failed to identify need of continuous learning as an important trait of ideal professionals. The need of the day is to have self-motivated learners equipped with life long learning skills so that they can practice dentistry that is in line with standards of care and backed by evidence. Such skills need to be formally inculcated in the freshmen right from the start of their professional education^{15,16}. One of the

curriculum thus needs to incorporate these mechanisms formally to ensure that the students do not fall in the trap of cynicism^{17,18}.

CONCLUSION

Freshly inducted students have strong ideals including integrity, compassion, altruism and excellence. There is a need for formal professionalism curriculum to reinforce these.

Disclosure

The current study has been presented as an Oral presentation at the 7th International Medical

Education Conference of Fatima Jinnah Medical College (FJMC) Lahore, 2015.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This study has no conflict of interest to be declared by any author.

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