



Do We Need to Train Our Dental Graduates in Skills Beyond Dentistry?

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ABSTRACT

Dentistry requires a highly specialised skill set which includes the teaching of both in depth theoretical concepts as well as an exhaustive practical training. Undoubtedly, the curriculum takes care of teaching every subject to the finest details thus preparing a dental graduate for being a complete health care provider with a focus on the oral and para-oral health of a patient. But in this ever changing and demanding scenario, when dental graduates strive to open their clinical practice in the already competitive and saturated industry or aim to widen the horizons of their career opportunities by entering the fields of research or public health and community services or other administrative positions in the field of health care. It is crucial that they are trained in entrepreneurship, administration, business management, practice management, leadership and soft skills. This review focuses on the skills which need to be added in the dental undergraduate curriculum.

Key Words: *soft skills, leadership, dental curriculum, entrepreneurship, dental practice.*

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INTRODUCTION:

Dental graduates are trained to be a perfect blend of a doctor, engineer and an artist. They are extensively taught diagnostic as well as clinical skills with a focus on oral health along with being trained in the art and science of preventing and restoring aesthetics and functions of teeth. But in today's scenario, the health industry is so dynamic and dental surgeons can choose their career according to their interest from a variety of roles. A dental graduate can opt to be a practitioner, academician, researcher, medical writer or assume administrative positions in national and international health care agencies.

The covid era was indeed a reality check for the health care system across the globe which altogether gave a new face and added new dimensions to the health industry. In today's times, digital health technologies, newer patient care delivery models and clinical innovation are the key areas to work on in every health care set up. These challenges have also created a demand for competent health professionals and have opened wide horizons of career options for dental surgeons as well.

When the demands of the health industry have undergone a sea change, the health sector has been through a complete overhaul, so should be the curriculum of undergraduate teaching? It's time for the academicians and the governing body to ponder over the fact that " Is it enough to be only focused on the technical skills?¹ Doesn't a dental graduate also need to be trained in entrepreneurship, administration, business management, practice management leadership and soft skills? [1, 2]

The dental graduates are trained to work in a set up where everything is already in place from infrastructure, equipment, material, auxiliary staff to patients but immediately after graduating, most of the dental graduates plan to start their own practice for which they should be well versed with a lot beyond dentistry. Moreover, as already discussed, there are a wide variety of other career options which a dental graduate can peruse, each of which requires a specialised skill set. As a result, the inclusion of the teaching of skills beyond dentistry in dental colleges seems to have become a necessity rather than an option. Hence, the curriculum of dental education needs to be revised to keep abreast with the changing environment and demand of the industry [1-3].

Communication & Soft Skills:

Good and effective communication is the key to success in any industry and mores in the healthcare industry where it is a proven and accepted fact that communication is the basis of effective patient care and management.^{4,5} Although a lot of factors play a role in shaping the personality and soft skills of an individual but to a large extent, these skills can be learned [1].

A basic knowledge of communication skills and patient psychology has been included in the dental curriculum by the Dental Council of India but a clarity as to how it will be taught (teaching methodology), who will teach that (qualification and expertise of teaching faculty), and when it should be taken (accommodation in existing curriculum) is not mentioned [4, 6, 7].

Good and effective communication between the doctor and the patient does not only help in building a good rapport with the patient but also increases patient compliance, follow up and as a result may improve the prognosis. Similarly, if the dental surgeon has an effective communication with his colleagues and auxiliary staff, it will help in maintaining a healthy work atmosphere as well as improve the quality of work thereby reducing the errors due to communication gaps. Hence, communication and inter personal skills must be included in the curricula of dental colleges and be taught in an active and exemplary way rather than just a passive learning [4].

Leadership:

Keeping in view, that a dentist might need to play a wide variety of roles also brings in the fact, the equal number of challenges that a dental professional may face. Not every problem or challenge can be anticipated and included in the curriculum but professionals can be empowered to face the unpredicted challenges. This can only be achieved by inculcating leadership qualities [2, 3].

The world has witnessed unpredictable, uncertain and emergency conditions during various times in history, the covid era being one of the most recent examples when every sector, every industry and every organisation needed an effective leadership. In such times of uncertainty, any individual, team or organisation has to strive to survive which can only be achieved by an effective leadership. No matter how competent or qualified a person is, for a sustained and lasting success, he needs to work and collaborate with others and continuously improve and renew his own and their capabilities. The best part of leadership is that it can be learned by anybody and practiced in any capacity [8].

Stephen R. Covey, who is considered to be one of the most respected authorities on leadership, believes that "Leadership is a choice not a position." He says that with leadership, not only the person himself becomes an island of excellence by finding his own voice but also helps others to find theirs. Covey believes that it is important to be principle centred. Principles that are universal and timeless provide a basis and direction to guide every decision and act [9].

The book describes leadership with four imperatives inspire trust, clarify purpose, align systems and the result of the first three- unleash talent. All these are interdependent and most importantly, these are not "management tricks" but real principles that make true leaders [9].

Thus if we are successful in inculcating in the undergraduates these qualities through various programs, workshops and talks, only then, will we be able to develop leaders and not mere professionals. Leaders who can withstand the challenges of all times. It is only through leaders that we can build strong people, organisations and build a great nation.⁹

Most of the people are not born with leadership skills and dental graduates are no exception, so an inclusion of a structured leadership program in the dental under graduate curriculum is the need of the hour [10].

For the growth of dental profession as a whole and the improvement of the services of oral health, one of the important measures is to sculpt professionals into leaders so that they are empowered to address challenges and adapt with the changing times. A dental surgeon imbued with leadership will be able to manage and scale a practice, ensure employee satisfaction, inspire and encourage his colleagues, build a good rapport with the patients and will overall be an asset to the society [11].

Entrepreneurship:

As already discussed, any professional who looks forward to establish his own practice after graduating needs to be well versed with the skills of entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is a wide term and includes an entire spectrum of skill sets. Professor Howard Stevenson, the godfather of entrepreneurship at Harvard Business School, defines it as 'Entrepreneurship is the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled'

Most of the dental surgeons aspire to plan their own practice and further scale it. Hence to enter the world of entrepreneurship, are required entrepreneurial skills. Entrepreneurship is an art, which requires finding gaps and filling it with solutions Entrepreneurship brings with it an idea which is viable

and scalable, a formulated business plan, management of human resources, administration and financial management. Hence, besides being competent in dentistry, there is a lot more to know to plan a business. The first step to enter any industry is to know your consumers/ clients. So, dental surgeons need to understand the demands, psychology and paying capacity of their patients. They need to be abreast with the latest in the industry with regard to equipment, technology as well as techniques. Like any other entrepreneur, they need to have a groomed personality with impressive soft skills, managing human resources, be well versed with advertising techniques and be able to maintain financial viability [12].

Teaching such courses and skills are easier to initiate in multidisciplinary campuses where such facilities are already in place and need to be extended to dental sciences [12].

Short courses on entrepreneurship and management along with dentistry would go a long way in future development of dental profession. These programs will not only inculcate the confidence in dental graduates to start their own practice and take it to scalable level but also increase employability, job creation and opportunities for other dental surgeons and auxiliary staff thus making India a hub for dental innovation and entrepreneurship. Dentist entrepreneurs reimagine how dentistry can be delivered.

Business & Practice Management:

Dental schools provide students with a good amount of theoretical as well as clinical knowledge, but they don't teach how to market a private practice. For any dental graduate who plans to have a practice must be well versed with its commercial side [13]

Running a dental clinic is no less than maintaining a business. Attracting patients into the chair itself is an art. Dental practices have to meet the challenges of revenues, increasing costs of doing business, attracting new patients and the increasing restrictions of dental benefits.

It is more difficult to handle an individual practice as compared to group practices, as commercials and administration are better managed in group practices by trained management and finance professionals. Group practices generally have a team of administrators, managers, HR professionals who can together run the business smoothly. Hence, managed group practices have gained popularity among patients as well as in the market and among other industry stakeholders like insurance companies, material suppliers etc

Whether an individual aspires to have a personal practice, group practice or wants to scale it to a level of corporate set up, a training in business management will definitely boost up the confidence of dental graduates

Social Media Usage:

In today's era of digital technology, social media or Web 2.0 as it is appropriately termed has carved a niche for itself, there is hardly an industry left without influencing or being influenced by it. Web 2.0 includes a set of web-based technologies in which users can write and share through open collaboration.

Gen Zs and millennials spend approximately 3 hours per day on social media. They are attracted and convinced most easily through social media. The communication through social media is more relatable than an advertisement endorsed by a celebrity. Similarly, the most accessible, convenient and economical platform for any professional to reach the masses or target consumers is through social media [14].

While social media is easy to use and explore, it is important that the content shared must be crisp, effective and at the same time correct and not misleading. Small videos, testimonials by patients, reels of the actual procedures being performed, pictures of pre and post procedures and endorsement by influencers can go a long way in attracting patients and building a good rapport in the industry. Short training programs in using this platform effectively can be started in the dental curriculum [15].

CONCLUSION

Dentistry in the twenty-first century is a lot more than a just a sub division of the health sector, it has a face of its own, its own demand and supply and hence its own challenges.

In today's times, dentistry is being demanded at two extremes: the upper class demands high-end cosmetic services while there are millions of poor waiting for a basic dental treatment. To fulfil the demands at the both the ends and to cover the entire spectrum of population between these extremes is indeed a challenge.

A dental surgeon is undoubtedly abreast with all kinds of cases and patients but at the same time, the dental surgeons are required to give customised services to all strata of the society. At one end, we need more dental surgeons to be part of the public health programs and be instrumental in policy making with the government agencies while to cater the other end, we need entrepreneurs, business managers who can establish and scale a practice and globalise it.

Whatever strata of the society a dental surgeon may be serving, whatever capacity he may be working in whatever position he may be at, any dentist or rather any professional needs to be inculcated with some skill sets beyond dentistry so that he is must e well equipped and prepared to work professionally and effectively.

All dental professionals must be formally trained and groomed to face an ever-changing population, a culturally diverse workforce, establish interpersonal human relations with the colleagues and auxiliary staff, deal with diverse patient clientele, be updated with heightened consumer rights, changing economy and be abreast with increased state and federal regulations.

Traditional dental education has emphasized the development of a highly competent diagnostician and clinician but has often left a notable void in the area of professionalism.

The covid era has proved that neither technology nor professional skills alone can drive an organisation. Rather in emergency and unpredictable situations, employees and their mind set are a major asset to sail through. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on grooming and sculpting a professional.

It is important that any passing dental graduate has an authentic vision, adaptability and passion. The existing curriculum for dental graduates must be revised to include these skill sets, so that we nurture competent dental professionals and leaders who are empowered to work and lead and prove to be an asset to the society, nation and the world in all times.

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