

Dentist's Perception on Patients Seeking Informal Advice Related to Their Dental Problems

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Abstract

Objective: There is a growing trend of patients seeking informal dental advice from dentists outside the clinical setting. This study is based on the evaluation of the perception of the dentists regarding situations where patients sought free dental advice.

Methodology: This is a cross-sectional study that was conducted during the time period of three months from May 2019- July 2019. The target populations for this study were the practicing dentists in various dental hospitals, clinics and dental schools in the city of Lahore. A sample size of 350 was collected using a pre-validated questionnaire and analysis was done using SPSS software version 23.

Results: According to the obtained results, majority of the dentists (76%) agreed that they give informal dental advice to the patients and the main venue where they experienced this mode of advice seeking were the social gatherings (49%). There is a prevalence of hesitation amongst the dentists regarding informal dental advice as they believe it to be an ethical dilemma (36%) which might lead to further medico-legal implications.

Conclusion: Majority of the dentists are of the opinion that informal dental advice to the patients is an ethical dilemma and getting involved in such practices without proper consultation and documentation may account for them to commit a medico legal error.

Keywords: Dentists' perception, informal dental advice, dental problems

Introduction:

Dentists may meet people from various walks of life daily or at social gatherings. When people know about our profession they usually tend to seek advice about their dental problems.¹ People also try to seek advice on behalf of their relatives or close friends.² Dentists may face situations where they are expected to give informal advice to patients like family members and general public. It's one of the dilemmas that exists in the society.³

There is also a free tele-health service provided by a foundation in Pakistan.⁴ Although giving such advice seems trivial but it might have a far reaching implication, not only for the patient but for the dentist as well.^{1,5} The history rendered

is just random exchange of information as there is no formal structured questioning and documentation. The information provided by the patient may be vague and can be inaccurate. It is not possible to check those patients as it might be embarrassing and usually difficult to carry out examination without proper light and positioning.

The dentist may not be able to give adequate time and examine carefully which is must for proper diagnosis and well thought treatment plan. This creates a challenging situation for the dentist who has to bring about an abrupt diagnosis without proper checkup and documentation and doctor may have to advise as per perceived diagnosis.⁶

The patient may comment on any on-going treatment or even change the treatment plan of the previous dentist that they might be following. The advice about cost and possible referrals may lead to potential conflict of interest and is prone to liabilities.⁷

A casual advice can have several possible consequences and may lead to ethical issues. People seek advice to increase their

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Received: July 27, 2020

Accepted: September 13, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52442/jrcd.v1i1.22>

understanding, this may lead to them searching the internet and connecting to dentists via social media.⁸

The real dilemma arises when patients tend to quote your opinion and try to gain advantage from the treating dentist. It also brings about certain risk factors which may be related to the patient's medical health and accuracy of diagnosis.

It may jeopardize the dentist's reputation and complicate medico-legal considerations. The rationale of this study is to determine the frequency of dentists giving informal advice to patients and evaluate the perception of dentists when they give informal advice to patients and possible ethical issue that they may face.

Although the relationship between dentist and patient is considered sacred in terms of trust and confidentiality but the dentist may unknowingly cross the ethical boundary by giving such advice to patients without ascertaining that patient-dentist relationship has been established.⁹

Dentists may not even remember this encounter but that person may strike them again and complain if anything goes wrong. PMC code of ethics has defined duties of general physician towards sick patients and cautioned the healthcare community against potential conflict of interest and unprofessional behavior.¹⁰

Due to the ongoing pandemic there has been a boost in the department of tele-dentistry which is a subunit of telehealth.^{11,12} Although, this growing trend has provided a temporary solution to the dental issues faced by the public, especially in a time when direct patient exposure was limited.¹³

The ethical and medico-legal implications still remain the same. The rationale to conduct this study is that it is relatively a new ethical aspect and has been not studied in detail. The evidence obtained would determine that how often the dentists give informal advice to patients, how people think of casual advice as a second opinion.

It would also evaluate the perception of dentists regarding patients seeking dental advice and how it may affect their career as well as personal relationships. The results of this study may help dentists to modify their approach to free advice which pose problems both for them and the patient. This may also help to create more awareness.

Methodology:

A cross sectional study was conducted in public and private dental clinics, dental hospitals and dental colleges located in Lahore, from May 2019 to July 2019. The inclusion criteria had practicing dentists (General Practitioners, Consultants, House Officers, Post Graduate trainees).

Ethical approval was taken from the institution's review board. A pre-validated questionnaire was used for a sample size of 350. Before filling out this questionnaire the participant was made to sign a consent form.

The questionnaire consists of three blocks: First block includes enquiry about demographics of the patient, the second block describes about characteristics of the patients and the third block is about dentist perception about patient and the problems he/she faces while dealing with them.

Data was summarized and analyzed on statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 23. Categorical variables were presented in the form of frequency and percentages.

Results:

The total number of participants in this study were three hundred and fifty amongst them 121 (34.6%) were male and 229 (65.4%) were female with a median age range of 25 (5) and 24 (3).

Majority of the respondents (76.3%) gave informal dental advice to any patient that sought them for advice related to their dental problems. The majority of dentists i.e 49.4% were approached for informal dental advice mostly at social gatherings.

The percentage of dentists willing to give informal dental advice in person only was 45.7%. About 41.4% of the respondents stated that sometimes their patients did contact them after taking dental advice. 40% of the dentists reported that very often their patients acknowledged that their dental advice was helpful to them. Majority of the dentists (34.6%) stated that they rarely give dental advice to patients without clinical examination.

About 34% of the dentists reported that they never decline informal dental advice to the patients who seek them for advice outside the clinical setting. 32.6% of the dentists reported that they believe it is sometimes ethically unacceptable to give informal dental to patients and 30.9% reported that sometimes giving informal dental advice can get them in a medico-legal problem.

Dentists that reported any misdiagnosis can sometimes lead to a possible risk to the subject's medical or dental health were 30.6%. The number of dentists that agreed that giving informal dental advice to patients without proper examination was never a justified approach was 43.4%.

Majority of the dentists i.e 73.2% said they always believe that it is better to encourage the patient to meetup and discuss the problem in clinical setup with proper documentation rather than casual consultation.

Table I Demographics

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Gender	N(%)	Age	Experience
Male	121 (34.6%)	25 (5)	
Female	229 (65.4)	24 (3)	
Total	350 (100.0)		1 (2)

Table 2: Patient Characteristics and dentists perception regarding patients seeking informal dental advice

Patients' Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Who do you usually give dental advice to?		
Family or friends only	66	18.9
Anyone other than family or friends	7	2.0
All the above options	267	76.3
Nobody	10	2.9
What is the most likely situation when you are approached for informal dental advice?		
At social gatherings	173	49.4
At public places	31	8.9
At workplace	108	30.9
At home	38	10.9
How are you willing to give informal dental advice?		
In person only	160	45.7
Phone call or messages	22	6.3
Through social media	11	3.1
All of the above	157	44.9
Do the patients contact you after taking dental advice?		
Always	34	9.7
Very often	83	23.7
Sometimes	145	41.4
Rarely	69	19.7
Never	19	5.4

Dentists Perception:

Do the patients acknowledge that their dental advice was helpful to you?		
Always	69	19.7
Very often	140	40.0
Sometimes	105	30.0
Rarely	33	9.4
Never	3	9
Do you give dental advice to patients without clinical examination?		
Always	4	1.1
Very often	31	8.9
Sometimes	116	33.1
Rarely	121	34.6
Never	78	22.3
Have you ever declined informal dental advice to patients?		
Always	16	4.6
Very often	31	8.9
Sometimes	74	21.1
Rarely	110	31.4
Never	119	34.0

In dentistry profession is it ethically unacceptable to give informal advice to patients?		
Always	44	12.6
Very often	50	14.3
Sometimes	114	32.6
Rarely	59	16.9
Never	83	23.7
Never	48	13.7
Giving advice to patients without proper check-up can get you in a medico-legal problem?		
Always	66	18.9
Very often	82	23.4
Sometimes	108	30.9
Rarely	56	16.0
Never	38	10.9
Any misdiagnosis in giving advice can lead to a possible risk to the subject's medical or dental health?		
Always	94	26.9
Very often	94	26.9
Sometimes	107	30.6
Rarely	38	10.9
Never	17	4.9
Is giving an informal advice to patient without clinical examination a justified approach?		
Always	17	4.9
Very often	39	11.1
Sometimes	76	21.7
Rarely	66	18.9
Never	152	43.4
Is giving an informal advice to patient without clinical examination a justified approach?		
Always	17	4.9
Very often	39	11.1
Sometimes	76	21.7
Rarely	66	18.9
Never	152	43.4
Is it better to encourage the concerned patient to meet up and discuss the problem in clinical setup with proper documentation rather than casual consultation?		
Always	256	73.1
Very often	39	11.1
Sometimes	38	10.9
Rarely	11	3.1
Never	6	1.7

Discussion:

In the present study, the majority of dentists (i.e. 76%) usually give dental advice in their surroundings outside the dental office as presented in Table 2. Social gatherings (i.e. 49%) were the most common venue for seeking dental advice which was similar to the results proposed in a survey conducted¹.

Whereas majority of the dentists (i.e. 45.7%) preferred informal advice in person when coming into office was not an option, they further added that their patients acknowledged their advice very often (i.e. 40%) which is different from the study conducted by Bhadauria, et al.⁷ which stated that it might lead to a political conflict rather acknowledging (Table 2).⁷ On further asking their perspective, majority of the dentists (i.e. 37%) were hesitant in giving informed dental advice which was similar to the study conducted (Table 2).³

Whereas (36%) of them believed that giving informal advice is an ethical dilemma. Some of them (i.e. 30%) had a perception that it can turn into a medico-legal error as they cannot properly examine the patients outside the dental clinic. On asking, majority of the dentists (i.e. 31%) had a perspective that informal advice might turn in to a misdiagnosis, further leading into a medico-legal issue, which is similar to a research conducted in India.⁷ 43% of the dentists agreed on the fact that informal dental advice to the patient is not a justified approach. The dentists (i.e. 76%) paid more emphasis on encouraging the patients to seek formal dental advice rather than an informal one (Table 2).

This study conducted has a relatively new ethical aspect and has not been studied in detail. The evidence obtained would determine how often the dentists give informal advice to patients and how people think of casual advice as a second opinion. Patients usually ask for free advice because of the level of trust and the relationship that is built with them over the course of time. This also has to do with the way other colleagues support and vouch for each other.¹⁴

It would also evaluate the perception of dentists regarding patients seeking dental advice and how it may affect their career as well as personal relationships. As in the ongoing pandemic, dental office visits are significantly reduced, informal advice was a better idea in the current situation.

PMC code of ethics has defined duties of general physician towards sick patients and cautioned the healthcare community against potential conflict of interest and unprofessional behavior.¹⁰ There was a devastating effect on the health care and dental industry in the times of pandemic.^{15,16,17}

Spread of disease through aerosol production was one of the leading factors that lead to an increase in the risks of practicing dentistry in such times.^{18,19,20} There may be times when it might get difficult for the respective dentist to deny informal advice to patients under certain conditions; however, it is important to keep in mind the ethical and medico-legal considerations while dealing with such patients. Limitation of this study was that it was a self-funded study and had limited resources. Future study may be conducted on a large scale to strengthen its reliability of conclusions drawn about study topics under discussion.

Conclusion:

Perception of the dentists regarding patients seeking informal dental advice from them revolves around the ideology that

giving any casual advice without proper checkup and documentation is highly unethical. They also agree with the belief that informal dental advice can have jeopardizing effects on the health of the patients and any misdiagnosis might lead to medico-legal implications. This is indeed an ethical dilemma that needs to be addressed and brought under consideration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: None

FUNDING SOURCES: None

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How to cite this article?

Hassan S, Izhar F, Imtiaz M, Abidi W, Tanvir M, Saleem MM, Salman A, Sharif M. Dentist's Perception on Patients Seeking Informal Advice Related to their Dental Problems. *J Rehman Coll. Dent* 2020; 1 (1): 15-19

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