

# Dental students' perception and knowledge regarding the importance of professionalism in dentistry: A cross sectional study

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Professionalism has been recognised as an essential component of dental practise since the twenty-first century. Various researchers have published definitions of professionalism, but the perception of dental students and graduates regarding professionalism in Pakistan has been limited.

**Objective:** The main objective was to explore the awareness and importance of professionalism among the undergraduate dental students in Pakistan.

**Method:** This cross-sectional research was carried out among the third and final year dental students from August to December 2021. Written consent was attained from all the study participants. Data was collected and statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 21. The Chi-square test is conducted to assess the association between the variables.

**Results:** From a total of 201 participants, 95 males (47.3%) and 106 females (52.7%) were involved. Among these, there were 93 (46.3%) 3rd year and 108 (53.6%) 4th year dental students. In response to being asked to listen actively to patients, the majority of the males (72/6%) and females (91.5%) agreed. Similarly, for recognising the needs of patients, 84% of males and 91.5% of females agreed (p value 0.000). Regarding finding it difficult to meet patient requirements, 84% of males agreed while 43.2% of females disagreed (p value 0.000). The majority of the participants who kept records were males (73.6%) and females (90.4%).

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that dental students had adequate knowledge and attitude regarding dental professionalism. The students not only listened attentively to the patients but were also punctual and showed compassion and care towards the patients.

**Keywords:** Dental students. Professionalism, Pakistan, Cross sectional study, Ethics

## INTRODUCTION

Professionalism can be best described as a combination of approaches, ethical values, actions, and relationships that provide a sound foundation for healthcare personnel's contact with society as a whole.<sup>1</sup> American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) has defined "Professionalism is a belief system in which group members ('professionals') declare ('profess') to each other and the public the shared competency standards and ethical values they promise to uphold in their work and what the public and individual patients can and should expect from these professionals".<sup>2</sup> Considerable differences in opinion have been identified concerning the importance of professionalism among healthcare professionals. Also, a conceptual overlap among professionalism, goodwill, and personal or professional growth has been identified. Furthermore, differences in thoughts and views can be found when outlining professionalism according to various cultural variances.<sup>3,4</sup>

Many health associations and institutes understand that academic reliability is an essential component of professionalism; hence, both professionalism and academic integrity are closely associated with each other. The American Board of Internal Medicine highlighted six comprehensive elements of professionalism, which include altruism, accountability, duty, excellence, integrity, honour, and respect for others.<sup>5</sup>

At various educational institutes, curriculum encompassing details regarding professionalism is not present separately but rather added as a part of another topic, with no clear learning objectives and outcomes defined.<sup>6</sup> Students generally learn about it indirectly and seldom get assessed regarding it.<sup>7</sup> Dental institutes generally teach professionalism during the clinical rotations through the personification of mentors or instructors.<sup>8,9</sup> Hence students observe the interactions of instructors with the patients and other team members.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore newly inducted students in the dental colleges already have perceptions of professionalism gained from earlier experience with physicians.<sup>11</sup> Previously

conducted research has revealed that students during early years at medical institutes have a better attitude towards professionalism as compared to senior students.<sup>9</sup> Also students who found themselves interacting with instructors, colleagues, and professional staff during their clinical rotations were found to develop a better sense of professionalism.<sup>12</sup>

Dental professionalism is basically a pledge towards values, behaviours, and relationships that reinforce the public's trust in dental care professionals. Hence, the presence of adequate knowledge, practical skills, and communication skills can help develop a professional's specialised knowledge and skills.<sup>13,14</sup> Much of the previously conducted research evaluated the professionalism of medical students. It was noted that students and trainees had a positive understanding regarding professionalism.<sup>9,15</sup> A Study by Gale-Grant et al regarding professionalism identified that many students also stated the importance of punctuality, hygiene, and personal appearance as crucial factors in professionalism, though these factors are rarely seen in the literature. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyse the awareness of dental undergraduate students regarding the importance of maintaining professionalism.

## METHOD

This cross-sectional research was carried out at various dental colleges in Pakistan from August to December 2021. Students from 3rd year, final year BDS, were included in this study, while students from 1st and 2nd year were excluded as they had no experience of clinical rotation and dealing with patients. Written consent was attained from all the study participants. Students refusing to consent and providing incomplete information were excluded.

The study questionnaire comprised of two sections. The first section included details such as gender, year at dental college. The second section included questions related to professionalism

which included showing respect to patients, listening carefully to patients, identifying the needs and difficulties in fulfilling them, maintaining patients' records and confidentiality, identifying personal limitations as a dentist, accepting feedback from patients, maintaining composure during difficult situations, punctuality, maintaining appropriate appearance, respecting and assisting colleagues if needed. A three-point Likert scale (1- disagree, 2 - neutral, 3- agree) was used to assess the participant's responses.

**Data analysis:** Data was collected and statistically investigated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 21. Chi square test for conducted to assess association between the variable.

## RESULT

From a total of 201 participants, there were 95 males (47.3%) and 106 females (52.7%). Among these, there were 93 (46.3%) 3rd year and 108 (53.6%) 4th year dental students. In response to being enquired regarding listening actively to patients, the majority of the males (72.6%) and females (93.6 %) agreed. Similarly, for recognising the needs of patients, 84% of males and 91.5% of females agreed (p value 0.000). Regarding finding it difficult to meet patient requirements, 73.6% of males agreed while 43.2% of

females disagreed (p value 0.001). Most of the participants who kept records were males (73.6%) and females (90.4%). (Table 1)

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Males	95	47.3%
Females	106	52.7%
Year of study		
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	93	46.3%
4 <sup>th</sup> year	108	53.6%

In terms of knowing patients correctly, 71.7% of males and 90.6% of females agreed. When enquired regarding having awareness about the personal limitations, 79.2% of males and 91.5% of females agreed. In the case of errors during procedures, 72.6% of males and 83.2% of females responded positively. For maintaining posture during a difficult situation, 93.6% of females and 84% of males agreed. When asked about being punctual when giving time to patients, 84% of males and 93.6% of females agreed. For completing dental treatments on time, 72.6% of males and 95.8% of females agreed (p value 0.002). (Table 2)

Table 2: Association of gender with variables

Variable	Gender	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	P value
Do you listen attentively to the patient	Male	88 (72.6%)	27 (25.5%)	0	0.00
	Female	89 (93.6%)	4 (4.2%)	2 (2.2%)	
Do you identify the needs of patient	Male	89 (84%)	16 (15.1%)	0	0.000
	Female	87 (91.5%)	5 (5.3%)	3 (3.2%)	
Do you find difficult to meet patients' requirements	Male	78 (73.6%)	17 (16.0%)	8 (7.6%)	0.001
	Female	36 (37.9%)	18 (18.9%)	52 (43.2%)	
Do you maintain patient records for the treatment done?	Male	77 (72.7%)	22 (20.8%)	7 (6.6%)	0.000
	Female	86 (90.6%)	6 (6.3%)	3 (3.2%)	
DO you know the basic patients' rights, particularly regarding confidentiality	Male	76 (71.7%)	27 (25.5%)	2 (1.9%)	0.000
	Female	86(90.6%)	5 (5.3%)	2 (2.2%)	
During dental procedure in case of errors, have you ever admitted errors to patients	Male	88 (72.6%)	15 (14.2%)	3 (2.8%)	0.001
	Female	79 (83.2%)	11 (11.6%)	4 (4.3%)	
Can you maintain composure in a difficult situation	Male	78 (73.6%)	28 (26.4%)	0	0.000
	Female	79 (83.2%)	7 (7.4%)	4 (4.2%)	
Are you punctual when you give time to patients	Male	89 (84%)	15 (14.2%)	2 (1.8%)	0.000
	Female	89 (93.6%)	4 (4.2%)	2 (2.2%)	
Do you complete dental procedures on time	Male	88(72.6%)	15 (14.2%)	2 (1.8%)	0.002
	Female	88 (95.8%)	3 (3.2%)	2 (2.2%)	

## DISCUSSION

According to the knowledge of the authors, this is one of the first studies to assess knowledge of professionalism among undergraduate dental students of Pakistan. Professionalism is an important aspect for dentists, not only with respect to patient confidentiality but also due to the communication skills that are difficult to measure and teach.<sup>16</sup>

Communication skills, either verbal or nonverbal, with colleagues, patients, or health care professionals, are the essential domains in most of the research focusing on patients' insight regarding professionalism.<sup>17</sup> In the current research, most of the male and female dental students agreed that they listened carefully to the details given by patients. These findings are, however, in contrast with the previously conducted research by Kee et al., where a significant change was observed in nonverbal and verbal communication between patients and physicians.<sup>18</sup>

It is patients' right that a dentist should understand their condition and provide details of all the available treatment options to them. This trait has gained significant importance from the patients' perspective. Previously, patients had a submissive role, where they thought that the health care personnel knew best regarding the treatments required. Similarly, in the current study patients' needs were identified by the dental students and feeling of difficulty in full filling patients' requirements were also identified. These findings are in agreement with the research by Taibah SM, who identified that patient perception has changed, resulting in a

co-operative role towards treatment planning, highlighting the significance of patient-centred dental practice.<sup>19</sup>

Another significant trait of professionalism was generating a feeling of ease and assurance during treatment.<sup>20</sup> The dental health worker's positive attitude causes an increase in the exchange of facts with the patients, which in turn provides more effective and enhanced dental care delivery. Similarly, the dental students have adequate awareness regarding their personal limitations as a dentist and regarding informing patients when encountering or facing any errors during procedures being performed. These findings are reflected in a study carried out by Palapati A et al.<sup>21</sup>

Time management is an important part of professionalism. In the current study, most of the dental students responded positively when giving time to patients for the appointment and completed their dental procedures on time. These findings are consistent with the previously conducted research.<sup>21</sup>

Certain limitations can be identified from the current analysis. It was primarily a single-centric research and knowledge, and the attitude of dental students was only evaluated. Multicentric research focusing on other aspects can be formulated.

## CONCLUSION

The study results concluded that dental students had adequate knowledge and attitude regarding dental professionalism. The students not only listened attentively to the patients but were also punctual and showed compassion and care towards the patients.

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