

Introducing Practice Management Education in the Dental curriculum: Results and Recommendations from a Pilot Project in the Indian Context

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Summary

Establishing and managing a dental clinic is essentially an entrepreneurial venture and requires a multitude of competencies that go beyond the scientific and clinical aspects of dentistry. However, the dental curriculum in India does not have a separate practice management subject included in the curriculum. Avenues for assessing the competency in this domain are hence missing from the existing curriculum. Thus, the aim of the project was to develop a dental practice management education module within the existing curriculum.

Recommendations for a practice management education program was framed in consultation with dental practitioners, dental educationists, and an interprofessional (IP) team specifically founded in this context which included a lawyer, architect, financial expert, bioethical expert, engineer, and dental practitioners. These consultations resulted in the development of a module which was shortly introduced into the curriculum. The immediate outcomes along with recommendations for further improvement are discussed here.

Identification of the Problem

Dental practice management education is one of the most challenging aspects of dental education, as many of the competencies required for successful practice management like business management, leadership, human resource management, legal aspects, and clinic design extend far beyond the clinical aspects of dentistry. It also offers the challenges of creating an environment resembling a vocational situation within the protected confines of an academic setting. This is partly due to the positioning of the academic environment in our dental schools within a system of fragmented patient management rather than comprehensive care, resulting in a compromise in authentic practice management work experience for a dental student. Thus far, the dental curriculum in India has yet to be systematically evaluated for its effectiveness in practice management education. Thus, a project was undertaken to evaluate the existing dental curriculum for the tenets of practice management, for identification of gaps, and subsequently for the creation of a module that would address the gaps in practice management education.

Intervention

Considering the varied competencies required for dental practice management, an IP collaborative method was chosen to develop the curriculum. It included a team of college administrators, dental educators, dental practitioners, lawyers, architects, business management experts, a bioethicist, and an engineer. A comprehensive literature review with inputs from the IP team were taken into consideration while framing the competency matrix and the learning outcomes for the module.

The module was designed as a one semester credit which was tailored for the fifth-year undergraduate students. All students were invited to enroll in the course, which entailed participation in all the seven sessions organized

along with the assessment and evaluation process. The delivery of the curriculum was done by the IP team members through interactive lectures, small group, and case-based discussion. The outcomes of this course were determined by pre and post module assessment of students. The pre and post module assessment revealed significant improvement in test score among students.

The following recommendations were made as the result of deliberations in this project:

1. Incorporation of the designed module into the curriculum: The module was well received by all stakeholders and was recommended to be included in the curriculum.
2. Introduction of Comprehensive Clinical Practice: An ideal way to simulate the vocational environment may be to post the students in a dental clinic under the preview of the parent college in a location away from the academic settings. The responsibility to run manage these clinics can be largely expected to be taken up by the students with minimum supervision by faculty. Students could be posted during their final phase of their academic program so that they are well equipped to manage the patients.
3. Introduction of mentoring and shadowing by established dental practitioners: The students can be encouraged to shadow a dental practitioner which will help the student gain vocational experience.
4. Incorporation of assessment of clinical competencies such as communication, team work, and professionalism: Though these competencies are learned in an unstructured format, where the students are taught few aspects or they learn it through observation, experience, and faculty feedback, an organized attempt to deliberately include this in the curriculum is lacking. A dedicated assessment framework for these extremely important competencies needs to be established.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt made to evaluate the Indian dental curriculum with respect to dental practice management education. The process of bringing change with respect to the dental practice management education will require changes in educational models, addressing the mindset of the faculty through initiation of faculty development programs, and introduction of IP collaborations. The immediate implementation of the short course on dental practice management done in this project was achievable due to the already available infrastructure and expertise within our academic setting. A point worth mentioning was the support received from dental practitioners whose personal experiences enriched the quality and relevance of the content being offered.

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