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## **ETHICAL DILEMMAS FACED BY DENTAL GRADUATES IN THEIR CLINICAL PRACTICE - A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**BACKGROUND:** In the new era of the dental practice, the demands of dental practice on practitioners in all disciplines are recognized but dentists should at all times act reasonably and in the public interest. While the Dentists Act states the law, the guidance to dentists on professional and personal conduct covers identified areas of practice where experience suggests that there might be potential for problems to arise which in many instances might have been avoided if the necessary precautions had been taken at the outset.

**AIM:** To find out the ethical dilemmas faced by dentists in their clinical practice through different scenarios presented to them.

**MATERIALS & METHODS:** A cross-sectional survey was conducted through google forms among the dental graduates through google forms.

**RESULTS:** Out of 125 participants, 99.2% felt ethics is important in dental practice; 83.2% participants think of ethical dilemmas in clinical practice & 20.8% participants in general faced ethical dilemmas while treating child patients (Significance level, P value < 0.05).

**CONCLUSION:** Ethics has been an integral part of practice, with appropriate training methods in the dental profession acceptable ethical behaviour in dentistry can be achieved by avoiding ethical dilemmas.

**Keywords: Dental ethics, Dentistry, Ethical problems**

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics had been an integral and intrinsic part of dental practice where it is concerned with the evaluation of human conduct and standards and judging whether the actions are right or wrong [1]. Dentistry, being one of the healing professions, has an obligation to society that dental professional will adhere to high ethical standards of conduct. In today's society, the ethical issues faced by dentist is constantly increasing and is becoming complicated than those faced in long time. Dental ethics is a social conception of growing awareness and overall health intrinsic connection of oral health. It should be respected and practiced as medical ethics as it regulates the character and conduct of an individual or a group [2]. An ethical dentist-patient relationship is based on trust, honesty, confidentiality, privacy and the quality of care [3]. Dentists have a dual role, being at the same time health professionals and individuals running a business. Dentist felt a moral duty to provide routine care for the patients amidst the fear of spreading COVID 19, but were understandably concerned with the financial consequences. Despite the explosion of information available online and through social media, it is difficult to identify reliable research evidence and guidance, but moral decisions must be made [4]. Ethical dilemmas arise from

fundamental conflicts among ethical beliefs, duties, principles, and theories [5]. Dental ethics still seems to be in the infancy position in many countries and literature endorses the same. Unlike US and UK which has a national healthcare system India doesn't have one but through Ministry of Family Health And welfare and bodies like IDA, DCI at state and national level control the profession and practice of dentistry. Although reforms have been made to eliminate the ethical dilemma. The pediatric dental team are familiar with the cross-infection risk but should not be placed at unnecessary risk as this would be morally unacceptable as it was the always of the perception of the health bodies view as consider every person entering to be infectious. Despite, the guidance and instructions from the health bodies the professionals faced the where the dental students and postgraduates where not using gowns, mask, FFP3 mask and eye protection devices. Analyzing the ethical concerns of budding dental graduates provided a basis for more fruitful and timely ethical discussions within the dental profession [6]. Hence, the aim of my study is to find out whatever ethical dilemmas are faced by dental students in their clinical practice through different scenarios presented to them.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional survey was conducted through google forms among the dental intern students of Saveetha Dental College and Hospital, India. After explaining the purpose of the study and obtained informed consent, a validated self-administered questionnaire containing five scenarios were given to the participants. A total of 125 subjects were selected to participate in the study based on convenience sampling technique. The questionnaire included five sets of questions to assess the participant's knowledge of ethics and its application in practice. It consisted of a set of five scenarios to evaluate the various ethical contentions faced by them. Each participant was given 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, after that it was collected by the investigator. The questions selected for the study were modified version of questionnaire used in another study [7] which consist of closed ended questions with 5 different scenarios and 3 open ended questions.

#### VALIDATION OF QUESTIONNAIRE

To make sure about face validity and content validity of the questionnaire, it was submitted to five members of pediatric dentistry faculty; for content validity, the questions were submitted to a every expert to be surveyed. To grade the necessity of every question and proportion to the intended purpose, all the expert were asked to score every question according to the

following pattern. Necessary question = 1, Useful but not necessary question = 2, Not necessary = 3, In addition, the experts were asked to write any opinion or recommendation. Then, the answers were computed according to the following content validity ratio (CVR).  $CVR = \frac{nE - N/2}{N/2}$ . The number of experts who selected the question as a necessary one: nE The Total Number of Experts: N After the answers of the experts were collected the questions, having CVR scores lower than 1 were excluded. The number of questions in the primary questionnaire was 10, 2 questions were excluded after CVR review. The questions were finally approved by the experts.

The questionnaire was pilot tested on 5 subjects to evaluate the ease of understanding. To ensure the reliability of the dental ethics questions to dental students after pilot testing, the reliability was approved by Cronbach's alpha value of 0.9. Finally, the validated questionnaire included 5 scenarios on dental ethics and 3 questions on perception of participants were prepared.

#### RESULTS

A total of 125 internship dental students participated in the study. In general about 20.8% participants in faced ethical dilemmas while treating child patients

A total of 96.8 people liked the survey and 3.2 participants didn't like the survey. The

82.4 % of participants who participated in the survey were of 20 to 30 age group and 17.6% were of less than 20 age group. 99.2% participants felt ethics is important in dental practice. 82.4% participants felt that they think of ethical dilemmas.

In the case of scenario 1 shown in **Figure 1 & 2**, 56.5% of participants think the dentist had violated the principle of truthfulness, and 53.6% of participants believe what the dentist has done was not right.

In the case of scenario 2 shown in **Figure 3 & 4**, 37.1%, 40.3% and 21.8% of participants believed that dentists had violated the principle of beneficence, justice, and autonomy, respectively, and 73.6% of the participants felt that dentists should not have undergone extraction of both the teeth.

In scenario 3 shown in **Figure 5 & 6**, 24% of the participants agreed that Dr. Nitish was right in giving his friend priority over other patients, and 76% of participants

disagreed with the fact. According to ethical principles, 27.2%, 10.4% and 62.4% of the participants, Dr. Nitish had breached the principle of beneficence, confidentiality, and justice, respectively.

In scenario 4 shown in **Figure 7 & 8**, 84% of participants felt that Dr. Vishal should have taken the needed precautions before extraction of teeth ie, complete history of the patient's systemic illness and needed precautions should have been taken before extraction, and 85.6% of the participants thought that what the dentist did was not right.

In scenario 5 shown in **Figure 9**, 23.2% think that the new dentist should inform the patient regarding maltreatment by the previous dentist and 18.4% believed that the dentist should remove the restoration and should start with pulpectomy without telling the previous dentist. While 58.4% think that matter should be discussed with the patient and previous dentist.

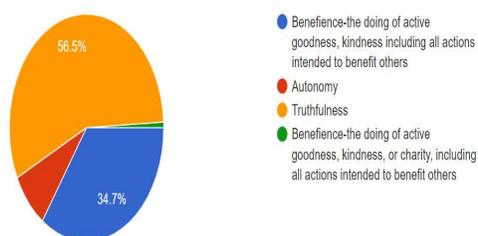


Figure 1

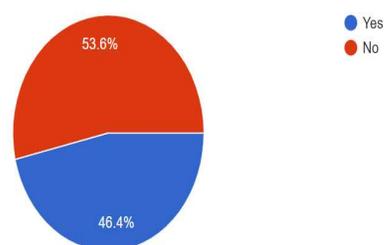


Figure 2

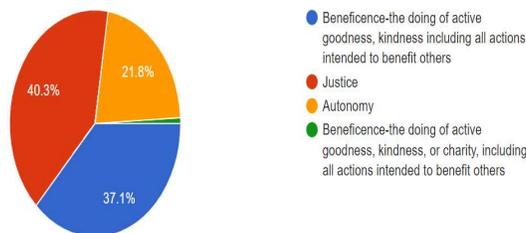


Figure 3

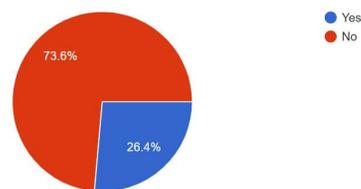


Figure 4

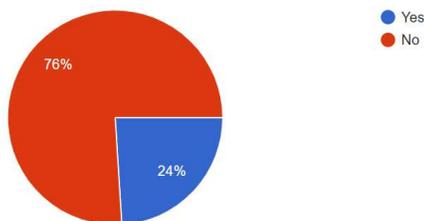


Figure 5

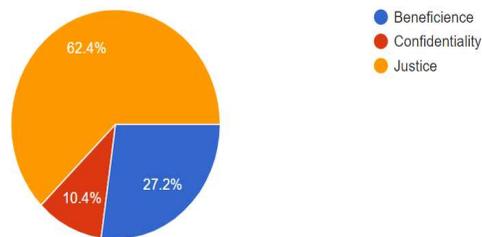


Figure 6

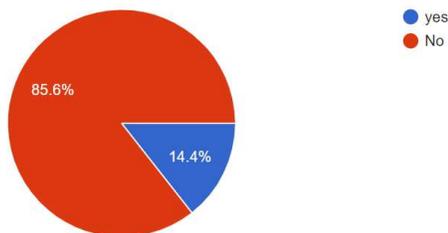


Figure 7

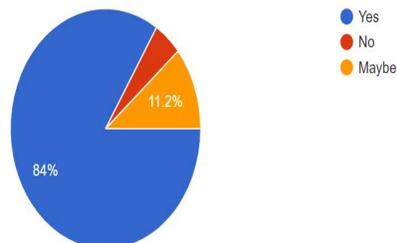


Figure 8



Figure 9

**DISCUSSION**

The American Dental Association has put forward the statement that constitutes the 'Principles of Ethics and Code of

Professional Conduct.' It is our responsibility to uphold and strengthen the dental profession as a member of the learned profession. The National Board for

Certification (NBC) believes that the guidelines stated in the ethical standards are fair and reasonable and represent the desirable code of professional conduct for dental technology [7]. The privilege of being a dentist comes with a responsibility to society and fellow members of the profession to conduct one's professional activities in a highly ethical manner [8].

The majority of the participants comments were regarding restoring of the primary tooth which implicates that the pulp management and endodontic diagnosis is entirely different compared to the permanent tooth and it ends up in a dilemma in some situations. Also, many people faced dilemmas was where the parent adamantly ask the clinician to extract the tooth despite providing the restorable options, so morality of the treating dentist was affected by the incident. Dental colleagues discussing the bad oral hygiene of fellow colleagues and making fun also can affect the individual by affecting their self-conscience and causing shame. As there is a hairline difference between the various principles, the following one can mean violating another. This results in moral distress, which has been defined as knowing the ethically correct thing to do but feeling unable to act. Indeed, research suggests that moving one's conscience at work can have several severe consequences for individuals

and organizations. The consequences include (i) compassion fatigue and burnout among health care personnel; (ii) decrease in an individual's level of empathy, and avoiding or withdrawing from patients; (iii) decreased quality of service in terms of patient's safety, patient's experience and effectiveness of care; and (iv) deterioration in the general health and well-being of staff, with high staff turnover rates and staff shortages. Ethical behaviour may be innate, just like intelligence and personality that have genetic component, so may the characteristics make some people to act ethically and unethically. The willingness to follow the rules is innate and moral sense. Some people have this innate sense, which may be a more reliable method of differentiating between right and wrong rather than relying on any written code of ethics [9].

However, dental ethics seems to be still in its infancy in many countries. Exploratory studies on ethical issues of dental practice could hardly be found in the literature. What is probably required is for dental professionals themselves to raise issues about dental ethics to sensitize the profession and help clarify the problems. Analyzing the ethical concerns of dentists may provide a basis for more fruitful and timely ethical discussions within the dental profession.

The relationship between the patient and the dentist should be adapted to the new times as well as to the changes and difficulties associated with patients presenting with confused or fragmentary knowledge. Misunderstandings should be clarified providing appropriate and clear information to reinforce the dentist–patient interaction link, which will contribute to improve patient's oral health. We should listen, reassure, diagnose, reflect, dialogue, and treat so that in this way, patients will obtain the greatest benefit from the dentist–patient interaction. It is necessary to keep in mind the importance of an adequate clinical history, physical examination, and complementary studies, and that we must observe and reflect before acting. Besides being competent in our profession, the patient should be always in the first place and that we are morally obliged to protect him/her and to counteract the deleterious effect of the lack of time on the dentist–patient relationship [10]. It is urgent to re-establish and reinforce the essential role the dentist–patient interaction in the medical performance, combining technical advances with the humanistic part of our profession

Considering the response got from the dental students regarding how to deal with the ethical dilemmas were on the vast varying scale, a majority of them were unaware of the ethical principles. The

dentist must conduct his or her professional life following the ethical principles rooted in the moral rules and to maintain his or her level of knowledge and skills. These are the principles of beneficence, autonomy, and justice, in both individual and societal contexts.

The concept of consent comes from ethical issue of autonomy, individual integrity and self-determination and it also protects every patient's right not to be touched or treated in any way without patient's permission [11, 12]. Depending upon the circumstances, consents are of different types such as implied consent, expressed consent, informed consent, proxy consent, loco patients, blanket consent and oral consent [13]. Consent has two purposes that are clinical and legal purpose. Consent plays a big role in enclosing ethical principles especially when managing children with special health needs [14, 15].

## CONCLUSION

Dentists enjoy the privilege of self-regulation and with that comes the responsibility to maintain the highest standards of ethical dental practice. The ethical issues about which dentists show greater concern are those more connected to the clinical aspects of dental practice. It is application of general ethical principles and rules to resolve the problems of therapeutic practice, health care services and research which is essential to

incorporate ethical standards in daily dental practice. We should provide appropriate training methods in the dental profession for budding dental surgeons for continuing towards acceptable ethical behaviour in dentistry which helps to consider and reconsider their actions, judgments and justification.

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## QUESTIONNAIRE USED FOR SURVEY

### Question no 1

Sooraj, a fearful and apprehensive 7-year-old boy, went for his first dental visit with a complaint of decayed mandibular first molar that caused him severe pain, and the dentist planned to extract it, so he asked the dentist "what he was going to do." The dentist did not want to upset him, so he said: "he is just going to look in to his mouth. "Which ethical principle did the dentist violate?

Beneficence/autonomy/ truthfulness

In the above case, do you think the doctor should have gone ahead with extraction of both teeth?

Yes/no

### Question no 2

A 13-year-old child with a history of COVID 19 was referred to an dental surgeon for the extraction of the badly decayed first molar. The adjacent second molar, too, had a sizeable carious lesion but was restorable. The parent requested the surgeon to extract both the teeth and also to prescribe antibiotics. The surgeon knew that covid 19 test has to be done and also that unnecessary extraction would complicate the case. Considering these facts, the doctor decided to extract only the first molar. Which ethical principle did the doctor breach?

Beneficence/autonomy/ justice

### Question no 3

A private dental practitioner, Dr. John, was a renowned dentist, and many patients visited his clinic from neighboring cities. One day, his childhood friend visited his clinic with his daughter for her dental treatment. Many patients had been waiting to see Dr. John for a long time, but his friend entered his chamber first. Was Dr. John right in giving his friend priority over the other patients in line? Which ethical principle did the doctor breach?

Yes/no

Beneficence/confidentiality/justice

**Question no 4**

Anik, who was 12 years old, visited a private dental clinic with his father for the Ortho treatment. Since there was so much crowding, so Dr. Vishak decided to extract all 4 premolars. Dr. Vishal learned through his history that Anik was suffering from severe fever for 2 days. He went ahead and extracted the teeth without obtaining covid 19 test or informing the patient about the pros and cons of extraction who is already having diabetes or prescribing any medication for it. Do you think Dr. Vishak did the right thing?

Do you think that Dr. Vishak should have taken the needed precautions before the extraction of the teeth in this situation?

Yes/no

**Question no 5**

Mrs. Varma regularly took her daughter 5 years old to the neighbour for all his oral health care needs. She went to see him when her daughter developed pain in a tooth that was restored a week. However, her dentist was on leave, so she went to another dentist. The new dentist examined the tooth, and he discovered caries with pulp involvement in the X-ray. The new dentist should

Inform the patient about the maltreatment by the previous dentist

Remove the restoration and should start with pulpectomy without informing the patient