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**DENTAL STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS REGARDING PRACTICAL
AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND THEIR CAREER
ASPIRATIONS**

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Abstract

There is some evidence that dental students regard clinical skills as more important than management skills. It would therefore be valuable to investigate whether management skills are perceived to be relevant and necessary for their career aspirations. This study aimed to identify students' perceptions regarding the most important skills (other than clinical skills) they have to learn in the dental curriculum and to relate these perceptions to their future career aspirations. The study was conducted in the academic year 2015-2016 by means of an anonymous questionnaire among second-, third-, fourth-, fifth- and sixth-year dental students at the Faculty of Dental Medicine, Ovidius University of Constanta. From the desire to improve the quality of dental education and consequently the need for graduates possess adequate and needed competences to face the challenges of the labor market, the faculty leadership requested from the psychologists from the University Center for Counselling and Career Guidance, to develop and interpret the results of a questionnaire. Clinical skills are generally considered extremely important. Leadership, communication and management skills contribute to the success of practicing as dental health professionals. Most students indicated that they would like to improve themselves by participating in continuing education courses for updating the working techniques if afforded the opportunity. Also, the results have emphasized the importance that the dental curriculum to relate with the future career aspirations. The development of management skills is therefore becoming crucial for dentists to manage their practices successfully and this will contribute to an increasing engaged workforce.

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1. Introduction

There is a general consensus on the future of dental education that highlights the need for careful recruitment and continued development of students and faculty as essential to the educational changes for future (Field, 1995). Dental education aims to produce competent graduates with the ability to provide quality care to the patients that will ease the integration into professional practice. This means successfully completing their studies, receiving their degree, and being able to insert themselves into the labor market (Raftu, 2016a).

To follow a career as a practitioner, graduating students are expected to be competent in providing quality comprehensive patient care and should also be prepared to adapt to the society needs and be competent in the practice management. Educational principles of the dental schools should facilitate the students' primary objective of integration into dental practice, while ensuring that students gain essential competency in providing quality comprehensive patient care (Manogue, 2011). The European and the American Dental Association recommended that curriculum restructuring should focus on evidence based patient care as the fundamental part of the clinical education, along with highlighting the need for teamwork, practice management, and knowledge of information technology (Manogue, 2011).

The ideal academic environment may be defined as the one that best prepares students for their future professional life and contributes towards their personal development, psychosomatic and social well-being. An ideal environment should place the dental students at the centre of the education process and provide material, equipment and facilities that best help them to gain competencies in a shorter period of time. Educational content should be made available to students through a variety of methods, because individual learning styles and preferences may vary considerably. The importance of their vocational interests and personality traits cannot be challenged because satisfaction of the doctor's professional derived from performing a work that fits within vocational its staff and personality structure can facilitate or alter this performance (Raftu, 2016b).

Once graduate enter the workforce, most practicing dentists become small business owners in individual or group practices. Therefore, dentists manage and supervise a number of other health care professionals including other dentists, dental assistants, laboratory technicians, and dental office receptionists. Beginner dentists also find themselves focusing on a number of administrative tasks including human resources, buying equipment, maintaining inventories, and dental office advertising. Each of these areas requires skills that must be known in order to lead and manage a successful business company. Also, for success in a private practice, excellent communication skills, self-discipline, and good business backgrounds are essential. Development of these skills is frequently not a primary focus in the dental school (Barron & Waldrep, 1984; Chambers, 1992).

In the dental schools' traditional curricular plan, business and management skills are accentuated at the dental practice management courses. These skills are also learned in ethics and behavioral sciences courses. After a student leaves the academic environment, the business side of dentistry is often learned through mentoring by a practitioner, on the job training, study groups, and continuing education courses.

2. Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to identify students' perceptions regarding the most important skills (other than clinical skills) they should learn in the undergraduate dental curriculum at the Faculty of Dental Medicine, Ovidius University of Constanta and to relate these perceptions to their future career aspirations.

3. Methods

From the desire to improve the quality of dental education and consequently the need for graduates possess adequate and needed competences to face the challenges of the labor market, the faculty leadership requested from the psychologists from the Center for Counselling and Career Guidance, Ovidius University of Constanta to develop and interpret the results of a questionnaire.

The study was conducted in the academic year 2015-2016 by means of an anonymous questionnaire among second-, third-, fourth-, fifth- and sixth-year dental students (225 persons) at the Faculty of Dental Medicine, Ovidius University of Constanta. The students did not receive incentives to participate in the study and they were under no obligation to complete the questionnaire.

All of the students received verbal information regarding the study from the research group before deciding whether to participate. It was explained to them that there was no right or wrong answer for the questions. The study was anonymous and all information would be available only for the group analysis. The students had the right to refuse participation or to quit at any moment. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants.

The questionnaire used in this study is a custom-designed questionnaire and was not piloted before.

To obtain the maximum response rate and minimize disruption to the study, the questionnaires were distributed following a routine lecture period. The researchers collected the completed questionnaires immediately on completion.

Participants were asked to indicate their year of study, gender and to specify whether they would wish to continue their study after finishing the faculty by a specialization program, competence program or by continuing education courses for updating the working techniques. They were asked whether they would prefer to work as an employee for a private dentist, whether they aspired to become a dental practice owner or business partner in a dental practice. An option was also they were asked to specify whether they wished to work abroad.

In the questionnaire was a question regarding the important skills other than clinical skills and students had to name other most important skills.

Also, students had to express their opinion if dental practice management should be a subject in the dental faculty curriculum plan. There was a question where students were asked to write the reasons why they thought dental practice management should or should not be a subject in the dental faculty curriculum plan.

We have to mention that dental practice management is introduced in the fifth- year dental faculty curriculum. Thus, among those who participated in this study were students (n = 95, 42,22%) who were able to express pertinent an opinion as they already have completed this discipline of study.

4. Results

4.1. Students' characteristics

From the total number of 261 targeted students, 225 (86.20%) completed the questionnaire. The number of students per year of study varied between 41 and 53. Table 1 indicates that the respondents were mainly female (79.55%, n=179) and their age ranged between 19 and 39 years old (year of birth between 1977 and 1997).

Table 01. Characteristics of the study participants (N = 225)

Characteristics	n	Percentage
Gender		
Male	46	20.44
Female	179	79.55
Year of study		
II	45	20
III	44	19.55
IV	41	18.22
V	42	18.66
VI	53	23.55
Total	225	100

The majority (87.55%, n=197) of students agreed that dental practice management should be a discipline in the dental faculty curriculum plan. The reasons why they thought dental practice management should or should not be a subject in the dental faculty curriculum plan, included: 'It has almost the same importance as clinical skills'; 'It will help to run a dental private practice'; 'It will help students to be prepared for what to expect in the business world'; 'brings information about aspects related to the medical activities that a dentist routinely carries out'; 'students may not observe the importance currently and may forget some information in time but one day will understand the role that it will play'.

Important skills other than clinical skills as perceived by the students were: leadership and management skills (77.6%), people skills (64.6%), communication and listening skills (46.4%) and personal style (42.2%) were seen as the most important non-clinical skills. Among the leadership and management skills may be mentioned teamwork, motivation, time-management, financial management, business and decision-making skills. People skills refers to sympathy, caring, kindness, empathy, compassion and friendliness. Communication and listening skills and personal style are referring to thoroughness, tolerance, patience, positive attitude, enthusiasm and self-discipline. Skills less often mentioned were related to ethics and professionalism, and entrepreneurial skills.

Students indicated their career aspirations as follows: to own private practice (45.33%, n=102), to work in private practice (15.11%, n=34), to work abroad (13.33%, n=30) and to continue their professional education through participation in residency exam (11.11%, n=25), 8% of the respondents (n=18) displayed an interest in working as an employee for a private dentist, 5,33% (n=12) indicated an interest in following the academic career, while 1,77% (n=4) did not indicate their future career

aspirations (Table 2). It is important to note that no statistically significant association could be found between the career aspirations of students and their perception about the need that dental practice management should be a subject in the dental faculty curriculum plan.

Most students (81.77%, $n=184$) indicated that they would like to improve themselves by a specialization program, a competence program or by participating in continuing education courses for the improvement and updating the working techniques if afforded the opportunity.

Table 02. Career aspirations of the study participants (N = 225)

Career aspirations	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Private dental practice owner	102	45.33
Private practice worker	34	15.11
Abroad	30	13.33
Residency exam	25	11.11
Work as employee for private dentist	18	8
Academic career	12	5.33
No career option indicated	4	1.77
Total	225	100

4.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This is the first study exploring the views of the second-, third-, fourth-, fifth- and sixth-year dental students of Faculty of Dental Medicine, Ovidius University of Constanta. This research incorporated the views of the dental students from just one dental school in the Romania and consequently, prudence should be taken for relating these findings to the overall Romania dental students. This research should, however, be expanded to a national level, incorporating all the dental faculties through a collaborative effort to investigate the need for management and leadership training.

5. Discussions

This study investigated the perceptions of dental students regarding the most important skills (other than clinical skills) they have to learn in the undergraduate dental curriculum at the Faculty of Dental Medicine, Ovidius University of Constanta and to relate these perceptions to their future career aspirations. The findings of the current study are, however, unique, as they provide the first indication of dental students' perceptions regarding the need for dental practice management and the most important skills (other than clinical skills) in Romania.

The findings of the current study that the majority of dental students who responded to the questionnaire considered dental practice management to be a necessary field of study in the dental curriculum at the Faculty of Dental Medicine, correspond to similar research carried out abroad. Previous studies have reported that students studying health sciences are becoming increasingly aware of the need for business training in order to have more knowledge about this (Barber, & Taichman, 2011; Field, 1995; Busari, & Brouns 2011). Qualified practising dentists also recognise the need for dental practice management education in the faculty curriculum plan (Khami, et al. 2012).

Clinical skills are generally considered extremely important, but skills such as leadership, communication and dental practice management contribute to the success of practicing health

professionals. Many studies acknowledged its importance in an undergraduate curriculum plan (Jawale & Tandon 2011). Therefore, the development of management skills is becoming crucial for dentists to manage their practices successfully (Dunning, & Tacha, 2011; Willis, 2009). These skills are often neglected in faculty curriculum plan despite tendencies that students recognize them as crucial (Abbas, & Benson, 2011; Kalenderian, & Timothé, 2010).

From the students' responses, it could be concluded that leadership and management were considered to be the most important skills to gain other than clinical skills. This study is the first to reveal that dental students regard leadership and management as priority skills. The students' perception that dental practice management should be part of the dental curriculum plan is probably the result of their perception of the complexity of the dental practice business environment and changes facing dentists.

Another possible reason for the great amount of responses that dental practice management should be a subject in the dental faculty curriculum plan may reflect the students' career aspirations. However, no associations could be found between the career aspirations of the students and their opinion about the need for dental practice management as a subject, also not when analyzed in terms of the year of study.

The above-mentioned findings are representative of differences that may exist among dental students with regard to career aspirations.

The results also indicated that they would like to improve themselves by a specialization program, a competence program or by participating in continuing education courses for the improvement and updating the working techniques if afforded the opportunity.

The findings also suggest that only a small percentage of dental students are interested to make use of their skills abroad.

6. Conclusions

The results of this study highlighted that dental students consider that dental practice management is an important part of the dental curriculum at the Faculty of Dental Medicine and regard leadership and management skills as having almost the same importance as clinical skills.

Clinical skills are generally considered extremely important and leadership, communication and management skills contribute to the success of practicing as dental health professionals. Also, the results have emphasized the importance that the dental curriculum must relate with the future career aspirations. The development of management skills is therefore becoming crucial for dentists to manage their practices successfully and this will contribute to an increasing of engaged workforce.

The results of this study suggest that a closer examination of dental practice management courses and their application to real life is warranted. Clearly, the importance of acquiring complete knowledge of dental practice management principles is essential to a dentist's success in practice. The rapidly changing economic environment and its impact on the practice of dentistry suggest that dental graduates need more business knowledge than ever before. Preparing graduates to run a dental practice using solid business principles is fundamental for their success.

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