

EDITORIAL

WHY EXISTING DENTAL CURRICULA IN PAKISTAN FALLS SHORT IN FOSTERING IMPERATIVE SOFT SKILLS? SOLUTION, TOWARDS GLOBALIZATION

Asaad Javaid Mirza^{1*}, Maaz A Javaid²

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1. MDS, Dean, Faculty of Dentistry, Baqai Medical University

2. Associate Professor, Department of Periodontics, Baqai Medical University

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are non-academic skills that refer to a set of interpersonal, communication, emotional intelligence, and social abilities that enable an individual to effectively interact with others, navigate social situations, and work collaboratively in various environments [1]. These skills are related to personal attributes, attitudes and behaviors rather than technical or specialized knowledge related to a subject.

Higher education institutions are increasingly focusing on training students in these skills to better equip future health professionals for an increasingly demanding job market [2].

The importance of soft skills among dentists cannot be over stated. In disputably, theoretical knowledge and technical expertise are vital, yet a dentist lacking in soft skills cannot achieve success in clinical practice. These soft skills serve as the channel between a dentist's proficiency and the effective provision of oral health care. Patients often feel vulnerable and anxious when seeking dental treatment. Strong communication skills, empathy, and active listening enable attending clinicians to establish trust and rapport, making patients feel heard and understood [3]. This stimulates open communication, leading to cooperation from the under-treatment patient and correct diagnosis by the dentist.

Like other professions, dentistry requires some explicit soft skills for success in the work environment and the quality of specialized clinical procedures. In a study, the author highlights key soft skills necessary for dentists, encompassing communication abilities, empathy and compassion, organizational proficiency, teamwork and collaboration, adaptability, problem-solving and decision-making aptitude, ethics and professionalism, as well as time and financial management capabilities [4]. However, the prescribed BDS curriculum in Pakistan falls short in prioritizing the development of the soft skills. A recent study conducted across four universities in the country identifies the lack of a clear policy directive from the regulatory authority, the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council regarding the integration of soft skills into classroom instruction and clinical practices and advocates for the establishment of a comprehensive framework aimed at seamlessly integrating soft skills into pedagogic approaches [5].

There are several reasons that can be cited for the inability to sufficiently instil the recognized soft skills in dental graduates. The traditional teaching methods miserably fail to adequately develop the soft skills. Lectures and passive learning environments do introduce information but donot actively involve students in building and implementing these skills. Often, soft skills

training are relegated to specific courses, like Behavioral Sciences, instead of being woven throughout the curriculum [6]. This fragmented approach hinders the connection between learning soft skills and applying them in practical settings, both within academics and real-world scenarios like clinical practice. Moreover, the curriculum's focus on technical knowledge and skills forces-out opportunities to develop and assess imperative soft skills.

Some teachers might underestimate the importance of soft skills compared to technical knowledge. This leads to a lack of institutional support and resources dedicated to developing these essential skills. It is also noted that some faculty members who don't actively demonstrate strong soft skills unintentionally downplay their importance and fail to provide students with positive role models to match. This absence of role modelling is another missing piece in effectively nurturing soft skills among students.

Soft skills are subjective and very challenging to assess using traditional methods. Without clear assessment criteria and standardized evaluation processes, it is difficult to accurately measure students' proficiency in communication, empathy, teamwork, and other soft skills. Addressing these obstacles demands a comprehensive strategy encompassing curriculum enhancement that prioritizes soft skills development faculty training, creative pedagogic techniques and rigorous assessment methodologies. It also requires cultural transformation that values the significance of interpersonal skills in both dental education and professional practice. Implementation of changes in curriculum and teaching methods hinges on collaboration, acceptance and willingness from faculty and the process may encounter resistance from stakeholders accustomed to established educational practices. Despite these obstacles, it is important to endeavor towards implementing programs aimed at instilling these skills in students throughout their university experience. This approach ensures that these competencies become ingrained as integral aspects of their habits.

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