



Scope and Challenges of Dentistry in Rural India

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Introduction

India with a large population set of around 138 Crore is a Big Emerging Economy in the South Asian Sub continent, yet around 65% of the population is classified to be living in the Rural Area. With the wide majority of the population living away from cities the distribution of medical facilities is uneven and access to quality medical and dental health facilities is still a dream for many rural towns and villages.

The growth of Tier 1 cities and their increasing demand for better life standards has indeed Fueled the Private Healthcare sector and that has led to a boom in the number of private hospitals and Clinics both in Dental and Medical field. The ease of access to trained staff, Materials, Equipments and other essentials to run a healthcare facility has been a major aid in the same.

Of Course all of this only being possible due to the Increased paying capacity of the patients in the Cities.

Current Situation in the sector

India has the second highest number of dentists in the world: 2.7 lakh are registered with the Dental Council of India (DCI). In 2020, the country achieved more than the ideal dentists-to-population ratio of 1:5,000, as against the 1:7,500 recommended by the WHO.

However, the urban-rural distribution of dentists is not even. Each year, 27,000 dentists join the existing workforce after graduating from 313 dental colleges. Of them, 40 government colleges account for 11%

of all seats and the remaining are in private colleges. The private sector played a huge role in the growth of dental education. But today, there are many issues in terms of education quality, lack of basic infrastructure and high tuition fees in these private colleges.

Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have the most colleges, while Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttarakhand each have only three or four. So, while India may have achieved the recommended dentist to population ratio, it has come at the cost of a massive privatization of dental education, uneven distribution of colleges and questionable control over the quality of dental services.

According to data from 2019, only 3% (i.e., 7,337 out of 254,283) of registered dentists are employed in government service. An increased mismatch between the availability of dentists overall and their availability in the public sector and in rural areas has created a supply-demand issue in the profession. The shortfall of dentists in rural public facilities is also because there are few sanctioned positions for dentists and the absence of periodic recruitment to fill vacancies.

Outlook of Graduates

In a study titled “Perception Towards Serving Rural Population Amongst Interns from Dental Colleges of Haryana” conducted to better understand the Serving Outlook of Dental Interns in Rural Population it was observed that Out of total participants, 55.95% were willing to serve in rural areas. Less competition in settling (46.45 %) was the prime factor for willingness, priority for post graduation (45.01%) was the main factor for reluctance. No significant difference ($p=0.365$) was seen in the perception of young dentists towards serving rural or urban populations.

With the Conclusion being Even though the current statistics don't reflect a satisfactory dentist to population ratio in rural areas, the attitudes of the dental students towards practicing in rural areas were found to be good.

Challenges in Brief

The most common challenges present in the Rural Areas include but are not limited to the following.

Lack of Awareness - Patients are lacking awareness to maintain good oral hygiene and only seek the dentist when they are in adverse pain, at that point they have lost a fair chance of restoring the tooth to optimal health thus leaving only the option of extraction. Simply Put the Prime job of a dentist in rural India is considered to be of just extraction of painful tooth.

Lack of knowledge of Aesthetic and Function of the Teeth in maintaining good oral health-Most population does not consider teeth to be of Aesthetic importance and is able to live happily even if they

are not having a sound dentition with a aesthetic smile along with that they are not able to recognise the benefits that teeth provide in maintaining good health.

Lack of Facilities and Labs for the dentist- Most dentists are not able to find highly skilled dental assistants or Consultants and thus have to resort to treatments that only their skillset can provide and hence treatments demanding Consultants are left out of the question. Along with that the lack of good dental labs providing high quality Lab work is also missing thus leading to poor quality Prosthesis, Crowns and Bridges.

Lack of High Quality of Life for the dentist- The lack of High quality of life that a dentist perceives he deserves is missing in the rural areas, even if the expenses and earnings may be more in the rural area the lack of having avenues to spend the earnings leaves the dentist wanting a city life instead.

Possible Solutions

The most important part lies in the hand of the government to understand the need and necessity of good Dental Health in the entire population and this can only be done by increasing the number of good paying government jobs in the rural sector along with better dental healthcare infrastructure with streamlined inventory management. The presence of quacks in rural areas also need to be kept in check as they provide unscientific solutions to the populations at unacceptable prices.

Conclusion

Dentistry is evolving at a very rapid rate around the world and it is high time that India boosts its healthcare and dental care, with corona having caused havoc around the globe, the need to provide the population with better facilities is a must.

The young dentists must also realize their role in the same by taking it as a challenge which has its own rewards, pursuing dentistry in the rural India does has its merits which cannot be attained in cities, the respect and appreciation that follows in rural areas is far beyond that of cities and the learning opportunities are endless as well.