**Graduate Mentoring in Dentistry**

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Being the seat of the most ancient evidence of the inception of dentistry as a profession, the Indus valley civilisation gives us a unique historical angle. The earliest footprints of dentistry as a profession dates back to more than 7000 years as evidenced by the use of dental bow drills.

Despite being the pioneers of the field, our dentists are still far from achieving the ideal dentist population ratio (1:7500), which is vital for creating a service platform network for our dependant population.

In a recent talk, PM’s special assistant on health, Dr Faisal Sultan, mentioned that there was only one dentist for 42000 individuals in the urban areas of Pakistan. He also added that more alarmingly, this ratio dropped to 1:500,000 in the rural areas of the country. Another alarming statistic is the high percentage of qualified female doctors/dentists retracting from active work and staying at home despite being a qualified professional. Where this dearth of professionals is being improved by the national authorities and policymaking, there are other facets of dental healthcare that need direct contribution from the dentist fraternity. Utilising the existing professional task force, channelising the young professionals towards specialisations—based on their innate competencies—, bridging the gap between theory vs practice, and coaching the young doctors for more practical aspects of the dental practice are just a few of the facets of practical grooming. Herein, the senior members of the fraternity can step in for the benefit of their younger comrades.

Dentistry remains unique in all healthcare disciplines in terms of its individuality. Its uniqueness is diverse and comprises of its training, its constantly evolving technical advancements, its finesse of craftsmanship, its research orientation towards persons as well as the material used but most importantly, its potential for entrepreneurship. With such diversity and uniqueness, the field of dentistry has always had the strength of delivering standardised healthcare to its dependant community through the network of its entrepreneurial professionals coupled with government-owned institutes.

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With the commencement of more dental colleges with state-of-the-art equipment in the last decade, we have enough young dental professionals to cope with the ever-increasing requirements of the community.

However, are these young professionals ready for the impact of community requirements? Are they prepared to handle the professional requirements about licensing? Are their mental faculties well-equipped to handle the related business and professional successes? Do they have an apt orientation to choose their path, locally or internationally? What are the local and international rules that govern their practice? And to top it all, do they possess enough exposure and relatable facts to make choices like the discipline of specialisation, work-scenario (private/employed), type of professional expertise to adopt ( clinical / research/teaching)?

With a whole conundrum of possibilities, our young dentists are a promising lot of professionals eager to excel and impatient to contribute. They are a huge chunk of trained human resources awaiting full utilisation to maximise healthcare provision if guided and channelised appropriately. This yield of young professionals is raw and ready to be cultivated for future aspirations. They need professional passions to be developed and research orientation to be established. One cardinal factor missing in this spectrum of professional development to healthcare delivery is the lack of mentoring and coaching by the senior dentists.

Currently, a few discrete examples of job shadowing do exist in the country. However, the culture of mentoring for young professionals is not in vogue. professional leaders do exist, but a gap needs to be filled to enable these professional leaders to become accessible role models for their aspiring followers.

The professional leaders, while coaching in the capacity of mentors, can create an enterprising and conducive environment for professional, intellectual, business, research and entrepreneurial growth. The refinement in the delivery of care is not just driven by undergraduate cognitive development or by career choices, which are solely based on financial landmarks. Professional accomplishment and patient satisfaction need a more focused, well-trained and outcome-based approach by the young dentists. One methodology of acquiring this sharply defined focused approach can be acquired by patronage and guidance of a senior professional who is aware of the cons and shortfalls of the path of professional refinement.

Senior leaders of our disciplines need to step in as the mentors and guides, for one-on-one mentor-mentee bonds, specifically for the career choices, specialities and entrepreneurial paths. Our mentees need to be trained to expect and be prepared for certain shortfalls. They should be aware of any backup routes to achieve their goals. The aspirations of mentees need to be made practical, realistic and achievable.

Career mentoring for a protégé is a two-way street enabling the mentors to be recognized as leaders, enhancing their professional impact having a better business outreach and also refining their skillset. A mentor will always be apt at updating on future trends. Close collaboration with the mentee will reinforce the working techniques.

We need dynamic mentoring programs whether rooted from the dental institutes, government-backed or privately collaborated to empower our younger dental healthcare professionals. Establishing a mentor program itself is a laborious and detailed endeavour. It takes more than a team of willing positive-minded lead professionals. Mentoring initiatives requires leadership training and capacity development. Ideally, the “mentors-to-be” should have access to the gaps that our healthcare system is trying to fill in. The “mentors-to-be” should be able to manage diversity and offer befitting solutions. Their profession-based acumen should be blended with a need-based approach to answering the specific requirements that the community has for their protégés. Matching mentor-mentee, elaborating program goals and defining achievable impact indicators all need to be explicit in an organised well-supported mentorship program. With a well-structured framework, the modern concepts of virtual mentoring or one-to-many mentoring programs may be the next paradigm.

Mentorship platforms would not only inculcate the much needed professional camaraderie among the peers but also redefine dental healthcare for the community. Once the dental fraternity overcomes the shortcoming of individualism and develops a framework of mentoring it will generate a continuum of professional patronage and immaculate healthcare protocols. This continuum will ensure that today’s mentees will soon be tomorrow’s mentors. Mentoring is a continuous process and paying it forward keeps the community, the healthcare, the profession and the professional all at par.

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