**Title: Ethical Perspectives of Advertising among Dental Healthcare Providers and Health Consumers**

**Short title: Ethics of advertising in dental practice**

**Survey/ Original study**

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**Abstract**

**Background:**

Ban on advertisements by dental professionals in India can be traced back to the1950’s with the implementation of the Dentist Act. As the practice of dentistry is mounting towards complexities, an ethical dilemma persists as to whether dentists should advertise their services. Most of the developed countries have partly relaxed their restrictions on advertising. Considering the fact that the health consumer has the right to know as a principle of autonomy and the right to access the latest technologies available, this study is set to evaluate the ethical perspectives of advertising by dental health care professionals and health consumers.

**Methodology**: A questionnaire based survey was conducted among the health provider, and consumer group with a sample size of 799, after obtaining ethical clearance. Data was collected by means of a validated closed ended questionnaire format. Three questionnaires were formatted in English and local language, for each study group evaluated by three subject experts. The questionnaire was distributed as a print form or through SurveyMonkey.com.

**Results**: 26.8% of the health providers considered advertising by dentists unethical, 52.4% disagreed on the fact that advertising can benefit their dental practice. 32.5% of the consumers disagreed to the fact that advertising can help them select the right dentist for their dental needs. Majority (43.3%) perceived that there is no requirement for the dentists to advertise their services.

**Conclusion**: Our survey indicated that healthcare providers still adhered to the code of ethics. This survey also projected that the consumers do not depend on the advertisements to select their dentists. A doctor patient relation is built on many virtues of ethics like compassion, trust etc. Unethical advertising is not cherished by the neither the public nor the providers.

**Keywords:**

Advertising, ethics, dental health care provider, health consumer

**Introduction:**

Dentistry as a health care profession has ushered into an era of globalization. This profession has witnessed dramatic changes incorporating new concepts and latest technologies while flaking outdated canons and methodologies1.

The dentist Act was established in 1948 under the Government of India (Ministry of Law and justice) to supervise professional ethics and to improve the service of dental health care. The Dental Council of India with the sanction of the Central Government laid down the Dentists (Code of Ethics) Regulations in 1976 and later revised it in 2014.

Advertising prevails in every field and is considered as one of the key ways for marketing and business enhancement. It has not only captured all domains also extended itself into field of healthcare service2.

DCI Code of ethics (1976), brought advertising under the unethical acts and stated that any advertisements either directly or indirectly for professional advantage or projecting the practitioner’s skill, knowledge, service or qualifications were unethical3. The issue on Ethics of Advertisement by Dental/Medical professionals has drastically changed over the last few decades and revised regulations (Chapter 6 – DCI Regulations 2014) so as to that a Dentist or a group of Dentists may advertise providedthat they maintain decorum, keeping in mind the high moral obligations and the value that societyadvocates on them4.

With the evolution of medicine from guilds into professional societies in 19th and early 20th century, many countries had imposed a ban on advertisement of health services as part professionalism5.

In 1975, American Medical Association’s ban on advertising was challenged in the U.S. Supreme Court by physicians. This led to the revision of its statutes with permission to advertise as long as they do not contain any false or deceptive information and is free to project ones-self through any form of commercial or public communication5. The other councils that permit advertisements by physicians are British Medical Council, the Australian Medical Association and the Canadian Medical Association5.

In India, the scenario is still unchanged. Era of globalization, advancing technologies and unemployment on the rise with surplus entrants of new dentists into the field has posed major challenges to the dentists. An ethical dilemma persists whether dentist’s should advertise their services taking into consideration, patient’s autonomy and right to information, though it an important issue with significant ethical and professional implications.

Considering the above facts, the present study was designed to evaluate the ethical perspectives of advertising by dental health service providers and health care consumers.

**Materials and methods:**

The present Cross Sectional survey was done, after Institutional Human Ethical Committee approval on 799 participants drawn from Dental Colleges and Dental Clinics across Kerala after obtaining informed consent. The survey population consisted of two groups: Dental health providers (Dental Clinic practitioners / consultants, Teaching Faculty) and Dental Health consumers. The data was collected by means of a validated closed ended questionnaire format for each group respectively. The questionnaires were distributed either in print form or through SurveyMonkey.com and were scored on a five point Likert scale.

**Results**

***Comparative analysis between demographic data and advertising ethics***

Out of 399 respondents of the health provider group, majority who responded belonged to age group between 23-32 years (157/399). The gender variation consisted of 230 males and 169 females. The provider group who participated with BDS or MDS qualification: 31.6 % (126/399) BDS and 68.4 % (273/399) MDS. In the consumer group 55.5% were females and 43.8% were males. Majority among the provider group disagreed to the statement that there is a need to advertise one’s practice irrespective of the age group (**Fig: 1**)

***Advertising ethics and code of ethics (Table 1 & Table 2)***

A majority of health provider respondents (63.2%) had not read the revised code of ethics on advertising and 71.3% of the health consumers were not aware that the health care providers are not supposed to advertise their services.

26.8% of the provider group considered advertising to be unethical, 25.3% respondents as not unethical or remained neutral in their response. Majority (45.6%) stated that there is no requirement for advertising of their practices.52.4% disagreed that advertising will benefit their dental practice. In comparison, 32.5% of the consumer group conflicted that advertising will help them to find the right dentist for their dental needs and only 16.9% agreed that dentists should advertise their services while 43.3% disagreed. **(Fig 2)**

41.1% of the providers disagreed on the fact that advertising will help the public in making better health care decisions and majority (55.9%) opposed that it is not right to advertise a new treatment modality that has been introduced into the practice. 31.8% of consumers stressed that advertising will mislead due to its false claims.

Majority (38.3%) of the provider group abided by the fact that dental practitioner who does not advertise is considered lacking in competence by the public and this view was contradicted by 51.9% of public. 38.8% disagreed that dental practitioners who do not advertise are at disadvantage when compared to a corporate dental hospital.

The mainstream (40.6%) of the providers considered that conducting camps, 45.4% surrogate endorsement on articles, and 55.8% websites with factual information were different forms of advertisements. 29.4% of providers and 34.5% of consumers disagreed on the verity that surrogate advertisements (televised talk shows with scollers) are not forms of advertisement.

In response to the question, “would advertising project dentistry as a commercial activity rather than a healthcare service?”, only 26.15% respondents agreed and 27.1% disagreed on the statement. A majority of the public (30.5%) also abided by the similar opinion. 32.6% approved that advertising can create a negative reputation to dentistry in general.

Global advertising has also increased over the years and dentistry has been expanding its horizons into worldwide tourism. Of the healthcare respondents, 52.4% opposed dental tourism and only 36.1% wanted to advertise their practice globally as a component of dental tourism.

32.6% of the healthcare providers agreed upon a right to enact a law to ban advertising in dental practice, 35.3% were not in favour of amendment in the existing code of ethics and 35.1 % remained neutral in respect to the same view.

The mode of advertising preferred by providers, if allowed, was internet 29.2%, followed by print media (12.94%) and 11.86% all forms of media (internet, visual, print and radio).

***General awareness of dentistry and selection of healthcare providers among consumers***

Other questions to the consumer groups were to assess their general awareness on dentistry. About 42% of the consumer had single visits to the dentist and 40.4% have not visited any dentist over the last two years.

Many of the respondents (80.4%) do not have a family dentist and 44.7% selected their dentist through word of mouth.

32.3% of consumers selected their doctors through researched selection and 51.9% selected their dentist based on the degree affixed on the name board. Nevertheless 63.9% are not aware of different specialties existed in dentistry and those who had knowledge (27.1%) were through their friends. Only 10.6% had visited the dentist following an advertisement, out of which 28.4% received quality treatment that matched the expectations created by advertisements.

When allowed for ethical dissemination of information through advertisements, 24.6% of the consumers preferred the type of treatment available to be publicized while 13% stressed on knowledge of dentist’s degree, treatment type, different specialties and treatment charges.

**Discussion**

Dental Council of India forbids advertising of healthcare services to meet up with the professional decorum. Medical advertising can be unprofessional because of the intrinsic and unmanageable risk of misleading the public6. Dentistry is a field with emerging trends, lots of new entrants into field and unemployment on the rise. This has led to lots of unhealthy competition among the dental professionals leading to the dilution of professional ethics8. This may divert the platform for the dentist to be more of businessman rather than a service provider.

The study results depicted the lack of awareness and knowledge about the code of Ethics existing among the community of healthcare providers and consumers.

Our survey results were also in accordance with the results of Dable et al that 53.19% of the respondents confirmed that advertising does not have any effect on a dental practice7.

As per our study both groups agreed that advertising will not prove to be beneficial in providing information for a better health care and the public believed that if the claims made in the advertisements are not factual and can mislead them. Advertisement of a new treatment modality that has been introduced into the practice was not considered favourable. The above views were contrary to the survey results of Dable et al that advertising and marketing could serve the community by ensuring better quality services7.

As per the DCI code of ethics, use of dentist’s name on designate commercial articles, surrogate advertisements, educating the public through TV programs or other media, dissemination of information with addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses etc., of the Dental Surgeon or the clinic, on-screen ‘scrollers’ with address of the dentists in television programmes are considered as unethical acts4.

The study also reflects on the lack of awareness of oral hygiene and the importance of routine regular visits to dentists among consumers. This proves that public awareness on the oral hygiene has to be introduced as a part of advertisement campaigns.

This study also established the reality that word of mouth can be one of the best forms of advertising. These thoughts were also reflected by Pandya that “Word of mouth” can also act as one of the ways to advertise one’s practice but it has its disadvantage when it comes to court of law. This kind of dissemination of information provides the doctor with the ambiguity that he was misunderstood and the exaggerated claims of efficacy through word of mouth dissemination cannot be litigated easily3.

Our results were also in accordance with statement of Dable et al that the internet and social networks have also changed the milieu enormously7. Nowadays both the providers and consumers across the nation use online testimonials and recommendations. This was well proved by our results that the consumer groups select their dentists through researched selection. In contradiction, Sabrinath (2011) projected the disadvantage that use of internet lacks control and the advertisements pertaining to the health services provided may be misleading. He also brought out fact on nonexistence of a squad or board to have a check on this9.

Unethical advertising though not appreciated, the demand for relaxation in the restrictions, would be beneficial in helping emerging dentists to establish themselves in a competitive industry has been a suggestion put forward by the providers which is in accordance with the suggestion of Dable et al7.

**Conclusion:**

The present survey proves that majority of the dental professionals are not in favor of advertising. Approximately equal proportion had for and against view on the ethicality of advertising by health care professionals. This depicts that the professionalism and professional integrity still exists among professional. Contrary to this there are a minority of group which preferred advertising to build up their services among a crowd of well-established dentists, as the new entrants into the field are on the rise.

The results of our survey indicated that healthcare providers still adhered to the code of ethics and worked towards the maintaining the integrity of the profession. This survey also projected that the consumers do not depend on the advertisements to select their dentists. A doctor patient relation is built on many other virtues of ethics like compassion, communication skills, trust etc. The societal expectations of a healer attributes to altruistic service, morality, integrity, transparency and accountability of the providers.

Lack of knowledge and awareness still exist among the consumer group. Education of the public is prime requisite. Unethical advertising is not cherished by the neither the public nor the providers. New technologies pose a major challenge to the upcoming dentists. A transparent system is a must for dissemination of factual information to the public in the best interest of the patient.

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**Fig 1: Age wise distribution (%) of need for advertising among healthcare providers**

**Fig 2: Frequency for need for advertising among healthcare providers and consumers**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | | **Strongly Agree** | | **Agree** | **Disagree** | | **Strongly Disagree** |
|  | Do you consider advertising by dentists unethical? | | 42(10.5) | | 107(26.8) | 101(25.3) | | 48 (12) |
|  | In your opinion, is there a need to advertise Your dental practice? | | 21(5.3) | | 62(15.5) | 182(45.6) | | 59(14.8) |
|  | Do you think that advertising can benefit Your dental practice? | | 9(2.3) | | 31(7.8) | 209(52.4) | | 89(22.3) |
|  | In your opinion, will dental tourism benefit your practice? | | 4(1) | | 25(6.3) | 209(52.4) | | 97(24.3) |
|  | Would you prefer to advertise your practice abroad as a component of tourism package? | | 24(6) | | 78(19.5) | 144(36.1) | | 68(17) |
| 7 | Which do you consider as forms of advertisements | | | | |  | |  |
| 7a | Conducting dental camps | 46(11.5) | | 162(40.6) | | 76(19) | | 26(6.52) |
| 7b | Surrogate advertisements | 38(9.5) | | 100(25.1) | | 117(29.4) | | 59(14.8) |
| 7c | Surrogate advertisements dental surgeon’s endorsement on commercial articals | 102(25.6) | | 181(45.4) | | 44(11.0) | | 20(5.0) |
| 7d | Websites with factual information | 103(25.8) | | 223(55.8) | | 30(7.5) | | 7(1.7) |
| 8. | Is it right to advertise a new treatment modality that has been introduced into your practice? | 7(1.8) | | 30(7.5) | | 223(55.9) | | 103(25.8) |
| 9 | Do you think that dental practitioners who do not advertise are at disadvantage when compared to a corporate dental hospital? | 18(4.5) | | 63(15.8) | | 155(38.8) | | 110(27.6) |
| 10 | In your view, are dental practitioners who do not advertise considered as lacking in competence by the public? | 53(13.3) | | 153(38.3) | | 81(20.3) | | 37(9.3) |
| 11 | Can advertising help the public in making better dental health care decisions? | 22(5.5) | | 70(17.5) | | 164(41.1) | | 61(15.3) |
| 12 | In your outlook, would advertising create a negative reputation to dentistry in general? | 40(10) | | 130(32.6) | | 85(21.3) | | 27(6.8) |
| 13 | Would advertising project dentistry as a commercial activity rather than a health care service? | 36(9) | | 104(26.1) | | 108(27.1) | | 55(13.8) |
| 14 | Do you think it is right to enact a law to ban advertising in dental practice? | 60(15) | | 130(32.6) | | 90(22.6) | | 32(8.0) |
| 15 | Are you in favour of amendment in the Code of Dental ethics on Advertising? | 17(4.3) | | 46(11.5) | | 141(35.3) | | 51(12.8) |
| 16 | If in favour of advertising which means or mode of advertising would you prefer | **Internet** | | **Print form** | | **Radio** | **Visual** | **All** |
| 111(29.9) | | 48(12.94) | | 8(2.16) | 36(9.70) | 44(11.86) |

**Table 1: Advertising Ethics and perspectives of Healthcare providers [n(%)]**

**Table 2: Advertising Ethics and perspectives of Consumers [n(%)]**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** | |
| Will advertising help you to select the right dentist for your dental needs | 22(5) | 98(22.1) | | 144(32.5) | 75(16.9) | |
| Do you agree that radio/ televised talk shows by dentists (with their names and phone numbers) are forms of advertising | 49(11.1) | 122(27.5) | | 152(34.3) | 32(7.2) | |
| Do you think advertising will mislead because of its false claims? | 87(19.6) | 141(31.8) | | 109(24.6) | 26(5.9) | |
| Do you feel advertising will project dentistry as a trade rather than a service? | 84(19) | 128(28.9) | | 135(30.5) | 35(7.9) | |
| Do you think a dentist who does not advertise is lacking in competence | 11(2.5) | 27(6.1) | | 230(51.9) | 139(31.4) | |
| In your opinion, do you think that dentists should advertise their services? | 17(3.8) | 75(16.9) | | 192(43.3) | 86(19.4) | |
|  | Degree | Specialty | Treatment | Cost | All | |
| If allowed for ethical dissemination of information, what would you prefer in the advertisement | 26(5.9) | 20(4.5) | 109  (24.6) | 9(2.0) | | 58(13) |