The white rabbit in a snowstorm: Untellable story of Dental Postgraduates in India

Keywords: Laws, policies, mental health, bullying, ethics, dental

The significance of dentistry has arisen since the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Even if, it seems to be a quality, fine field, the melancholy and cynicism of the lives of dentists in general and students especially is seldom inquired.

Limited research is done and is available on the mental torment and ethical exploitation of dental students in colleges. In addition to the dismay of nightmares, there is no legal succor or glimmer of hope for the sanctuary of students. Questionaries’ based surveys were conducted to investigate the mental health status of students enrolled in dental courses. Aspects like anxiety, depression, and stress have been probed. A striking observance in all these studies is that the bullying and intimidation of students at the hands of teachers and college administration are appalling. A recent survey reported that bullying by staff and college administration is highly prevalent, and lack of policies and laws lead them to be pressurized leading them to develop stress, anxiety, and depression.1 This is not just true for one or a few reports; but for all the surveys in India. Surveys done among undergraduates and postgraduates have reported being bullied, threatened, and pressurized by college department staff and administrative staff. The bullying environment and stressor atmosphere made by the staff makes the students feel so helpless that either it compels the students for substance abuse or suicidal intents.2-3

Studies and surveys have fetched a series of factors that are primary stressors for the students. The most despairing and disturbing factors are - criticism by superiors for academic or clinical related work, cheating by faculty, rules and regulations of faculty members, and threat to career and prospects.4-5

Further, a good number of cases do get reported to the higher authorities each year, but that just adds agony to the student's present mental state. A survey reported that 34% of the survey participants reported mental harassment and bullying, but the absence of laws, policies, and measures made their situation more terrifying.1 In media and news, we often hear about harassment (mental, physical and emotional) of dental students, who often opt out of the field due to a lack of policies. At a time, when India is flying its colors in pride of being the largest democracy and consequential constitutional laws; there is hardly any; if at all, policies and laws to charge, protest or stand up against mental, emotional, and physical harassment by the faculty and administrative staffs. it is no surprise that dentists have one of the highest suicide rates in the world.6-8 Lack of interest, adds with the expenses and investments in course, peer pressure, family burden, and society abash cracks even the toughest and sturdy students. As such, lack empathy from staff and unrestrained chance to shatter a student often led them to develop as mentally unstable adults. The question we should be asking is: Is this process of making a dental doctor’s journey righteous?

If no, why have we failed to draft any laws to punish the monsters who take the opportunity to devour the soul of such a novel profession. Why can’t there be simple policies to protect the interests and mental health state of the student? Should criticism in any form be acceptable when it may lead to severe mental, emotional, and psychological down lift in motivation, self-confidence and may indeed drive the student to take extreme steps or divert themselves to substance abuse for adaptation?

This is high time, we get laws in our constitution to protect the future of our nation from mental health problems. For once the children of today grow up with low self-esteem, low confidence, we can’t do anything to change the future for them.

Reference:

1. Lahari, A., Shanthi, M., Sudhir, K., Fareed, N., & Kumar, Rvsk. (2012). Bullying perceptions among post-graduate dental students of Andhra Pradesh, India. Journal of Education and Ethics in Dentistry, 2(1), 20. doi:10.4103/0974-7761.115143
2. Bathla M, Singh M, Kulhara P, Chandna S, Aneja J. Evaluation of anxiety, depression and suicidal intent in undergraduate dental students: A cross-sectional study. Contemp Clin Dent. 2015 Apr-Jun;6(2):215-22. doi: 10.4103/0976-237X.156050. PMID: 26097358; PMCID: PMC4456745.
3. Bhatta, S., Sapkota, M. R., Shrestha, S., & Shrestha, R. M. (2018). Substance Abuse among Students in a Dental School. Journal of Nepal Medical Association, 56(214), 896-899. <https://doi.org/10.31729/jnma.3900>
4. Saleem, A., Gupta, P., K K, S., Mir, H., Srivastav, D., & Singh, A. V. (2020). Perceived sources of stress amongst Indian dental students in Bareilly city. UNIVERSITYJOURNALOF DENTALSCIENCES, 6(2): 42-1.
5. Kumar, S., Dagli, R. J., Mathur, A., Jain, M., Prabu, D., & Kulkarni, S. (2009). Perceived sources of stress amongst Indian dental students. European Journal of Dental Education, 13(1), 39–45. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0579.2008.00535.x
6. Srivastava K, Chaudhury S, Bhat P S, Prakash J. Occupation-related suicide. Ind Psychiatry J 2019;28:1-3
7. Kumar G, Dash P. Are dentists suicide prone? The current scenario. J Prim Care Dent Oral Health 2020;1:3-7
8. Jones LM, Cotter R, Birch KM. A review of occupationally-linked suicide for dentists. N Z Dent J. 2016 Jun;112(2):39-46. PMID: 27506000.