



Continuing Professional Development and Knowledge Exchange Among Dental Professionals in India

Dr. V. Ilayaraja¹, Dr. T. Maheswaran^{2*}, Dr. S. Jeelani³, Dr. S. Vijayparthiban⁴, Dr. R. Suresh⁵

¹Professor, Department of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Oral Microbiology, Vivekanandha Dental College for Women, Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Professor, Department of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Oral Microbiology, Adhiparasakthi Dental College and Hospital, Melmaruvathur, Tamil Nadu, India

³Professor and Head of the Department, Department of Oral Medicine & Radiology, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan Dental College, Perambalur, Tamil Nadu, India.

⁴Senior Resident, Department of Dental Surgery, Thanjavur Medical College, Tamil Nadu, India.

⁵Senior Resident, Department of Dental Surgery, Thanjavur Medical College, Tamil Nadu, India.

Corresponding Author: Dr. T. Maheswaran, Professor, Department of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Oral Microbiology, Adhiparasakthi Dental College and Hospital, Melmaruvathur, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Abstract

Background: Professional development and knowledge exchange are essential components of contemporary dental practice. In India, the rapidly expanding dental workforce faces unique challenges in terms of maintaining clinical competence and integrating evidence-based approaches into practice.

Review: This narrative review examines the landscape of continuing professional development among Indian dental practitioners by exploring participation patterns, barriers, knowledge translation mechanisms, and emerging educational modalities. Recent studies have shown that while dental professionals recognize the importance of ongoing education, significant barriers, including time constraints, financial burdens, and accessibility issues, limit participation. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of dental education, revealing both opportunities and challenges in virtual learning platforms. Evidence-based dentistry remains incompletely integrated into routine practice, highlighting the gap in knowledge translation from research to clinical application.

Conclusion: Strengthening continuing professional development infrastructure, enhancing evidence-based practice integration, and leveraging technology-enabled learning platforms are critical for advancing the competence and effectiveness of the dental workforce in India. Addressing systemic barriers and fostering interprofessional collaboration are essential for meeting the evolving healthcare needs.

Introduction

The dental profession in India has experienced remarkable expansion over the past two decades, with the number of dental colleges increasing from fewer than 200 in 2004 to over 300 institutions by 2014, producing approximately 25,270 graduates annually [1,2]. This rapid growth has created a workforce of over 117,825 registered dentists, yielding a dentist-to-population ratio of approximately 1:10,271 [3]. However, this expansion has been accompanied by significant challenges related to geographic maldistribution, employment opportunities, and the imperative for continuous professional development [4,5].

Continuing professional development represents the conscious updating of professional knowledge and improvement of professional competence throughout a practitioner's working life [6]. The Dental Council of India mandates 150 continuing dental education credits over five years, recognizing that the rapid evolution of dentistry necessitates lifelong learning [7]. However, the effectiveness of existing professional development systems in maintaining clinical competence and translating research evidence into practice remains unclear.

This narrative review synthesizes the current evidence on continuing professional development and knowledge exchange among dental professionals in India, examining participation patterns, barriers and facilitators, knowledge translation mechanisms, emerging educational modalities, and future directions for enhancing the professional development infrastructure.

The Landscape of Continuing Professional Development in Indian Dentistry

Continuing dental education programs in India are organized primarily through the Indian Dental Association, state dental councils, and private organizations, offering diverse learning opportunities across various dental specialties [8]. A cross-sectional study of 426 private dental practitioners in Tricity revealed that only 38.6 percent regularly attended continuing dental education programs, although 84.2 percent expressed interest in programs related to dental implants [8]. This discrepancy between interest and participation underscores the systemic barriers preventing practitioners from accessing professional development opportunities.

The professional development landscape encompasses multiple modalities, including journal reading, conferences, workshops, hands-on courses, and peer discussions [9]. Among dental practitioners in Hubli-Dharwad, discussion with colleagues and reading textbooks were rated as the most useful continuing professional development activities, while attending dental fairs and interacting with medical representatives received lower ratings [9]. These preferences suggest that practitioners value peer-based learning and self-directed educational activities over commercial events.

Participation patterns revealed significant variations based on educational qualifications, institutional affiliations, and practice settings. Studies have consistently demonstrated that postgraduate-qualified dentists and those affiliated with academic institutions participate more frequently in continuing professional development activities than general practitioners in private practice [8,10]. This disparity raises concerns about maintaining clinical competence across the broader dental workforce, particularly among practitioners serving underserved populations.

The Dental Council of India's continuing dental education credit system has established a regulatory framework for professional development [7]. However, concerns have been raised regarding the financial burden

of conference attendance, particularly for postgraduates who must spend substantial sums attending specialty conferences to acquire the mandated credits [7]. The accreditation of specialty national conferences with 18 credits for three-day attendance creates financial pressures that may disproportionately affect practitioners in lower socioeconomic tiers [7].

Evidence-Based Practice and Knowledge Translation

Evidence-based dentistry, defined as the judicious integration of systematic assessments of clinically relevant scientific evidence with clinical expertise and patient preferences, has not been adequately implemented in Indian dental practice [11,12]. Studies examining knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors toward evidence-based dentistry among dental professionals in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh revealed that most practitioners were unfamiliar with evidence-based dentistry principles, although many expressed positive attitudes toward adopting such approaches [12,13].

Among dental faculty members in Bhopal, only 32 percent strongly agreed that evidence-based dentistry represents a process of making decisions based on scientifically proven evidence, and 30 percent disagreed that textbooks or experienced colleagues provide the quickest route for finding evidence [13]. These findings indicate fundamental knowledge gaps regarding evidence hierarchies and the critical appraisal skills necessary for evidence-based practice.

Knowledge translation, the process of moving research findings from knowledge to action, represents a critical bridge between dental science and clinical practice [14]. However, barriers to implementing evidence-based dentistry in India include limited time for literature searches, insufficient training in critical appraisal, restricted access to databases, and the complex nature of the evidence-based practice processes [15]. These barriers create a persistent gap between the available evidence and actual clinical practice.

The development of knowledge translation strategies tailored to the Indian context requires attention to infrastructure limitations, educational system modifications, and the creation of accessible evidence synthesis platforms [14]. Online platforms providing time-efficient, synthesized evidence summaries may facilitate more efficient knowledge translation than traditional continuing education formats [14]. However, these platforms remain underdeveloped in the Indian dental education ecosystem.

Barriers and Facilitators to Professional Development

Multiple barriers constrain Indian dental practitioners' participation in continuing professional development. Time shortage is the predominant barrier, as cited by the majority of respondents across multiple studies [8]. The demands of clinical practice, particularly in private settings where practitioners depend on patient volume for income, create substantial time pressures that limit engagement in educational activities [8].

Financial constraints represent the second major barrier, with program fees, travel costs, and opportunity costs associated with practice closure creating significant burdens [7, 8]. This economic barrier disproportionately affects practitioners in the private sector, who may have limited financial reserves compared to those in government positions with stable salaries [7].

The absence of hands-on or clinical workshops constitutes another frequently cited barrier, with 45.8 percent of practitioners in one study identifying this limitation [8]. Dental professionals prefer practical, clinically oriented learning experiences that are directly applicable to their practice settings [8]. This preference aligns with evidence from

international contexts, suggesting that multifaceted and mixed didactic-interactive methods are more effective for learning and behavior change than purely didactic formats [16].

Accessibility issues, including geographic distance to educational venues and the concentration of learning opportunities in major urban centers, further limit participation, particularly for practitioners in rural or semi-urban areas [4,5]. The maldistribution of educational resources mirrors the broader geographic inequities in dental workforce distribution, creating compounded disadvantages for practitioners serving underserved populations [4,5].

Facilitators of professional development participation include intrinsic motivation for professional growth, recognition of knowledge gaps, the desire to provide high-quality care, and regulatory credit requirements [9]. Practitioners affiliated with academic institutions benefit from institutional support, protected time for educational activities, and proximity to learning resources [8]. Creating similar enabling conditions for practitioners in both private and rural settings remains a critical challenge in the field.

Digital Transformation and Online Learning Platforms

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated an unprecedented transition from in-person to online education across Indian dental institutions [17,19]. Multiple studies evaluating this transition have revealed the opportunities and limitations of digital learning modalities. Among undergraduate dental students across India, the majority expressed a preference for traditional face-to-face learning over online formats, citing technical difficulties, lack of hands-on experience, and reduced interaction quality [17,18,19].

Despite these challenges, online learning has several advantages, including flexibility, accessibility, elimination of travel requirements, and opportunities for self-paced learning [20]. The integration of synchronous and asynchronous communication in flipped classroom models showed promise for continuing professional development, with dental hygienists reporting enhanced knowledge gain, ease of virtual networking, and direct practical application through collaborative learning [21].

The effectiveness of online continuing dental education appears to be context-dependent, with theoretical content translating more readily to digital formats than practical skills training [17,19]. Studies have identified eyestrain, headaches, and psychological stress as common adverse effects of prolonged digital learning, highlighting the need for an optimized online learning design that incorporates regular breaks and varied activities [22].

For continuing professional development, online platforms offer potential solutions to accessibility and time constraints that limit traditional workshop attendance [20,21]. However, realizing this potential requires investment in robust digital infrastructure, faculty development for online instruction, and the creation of interactive, clinically relevant content [19,20]. The post-pandemic period presents an opportunity to develop hybrid models that combine the advantages of both in-person and digital learning formats [19].

Professional Networking and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Professional networking and collaborative learning represent underutilized dimensions of continuing professional development in the field of dentistry in India. While the international literature emphasizes interprofessional education and collaborative practice as essential for comprehensive patient care [23,24], dental education in India remains predominantly interprofessional with limited integration of interprofessional learning experiences [25].

Interprofessional collaboration, defined as working within and across healthcare disciplines, offers benefits, including enhanced patient-centered care, improved patient safety, and more efficient resource utilization [23,24]. In dentistry, integration into broader healthcare teams is becoming increasingly important, given the growing recognition of the bidirectional relationship between oral health and systemic conditions [6]. However, the preparation of dental professionals for team-based collaborative practice remains limited.

Professional networks facilitate knowledge exchange through informal peer consultation, discussion of challenging cases, sharing clinical experiences, and dissemination of practice innovations [9]. Indian practitioners rate discussions with colleagues as a valued continuing professional development activity, suggesting the recognition of the value of peer learning [9]. Formalizing and expanding such networks through professional associations, online communities of practice, and structured mentorship programs can enhance knowledge dissemination and practice quality.

The emergence of social media platforms and messaging applications has presented new opportunities for professional networking and knowledge sharing [26]. However, ensuring information quality, maintaining professional standards, and avoiding commercial influences on these informal channels requires careful consideration [26]. Structured, moderated professional networks that combine the accessibility of digital platforms with quality assurance mechanisms may represent an optimal model for this purpose.

Future Directions and Prospects

Advancing continuing professional development in Indian dentistry requires multifaceted strategies to address infrastructure, content, delivery modalities, and systemic barriers. First, the expansion of accessible and affordable continuing education programs tailored to diverse practitioner needs is essential [8]. This includes the development of specialty-specific content, practice management topics, and emerging clinical techniques delivered in multiple formats to accommodate varying learning preferences and accessibility constraints.

Second, the integration of evidence-based dentistry principles throughout undergraduate and postgraduate curricula will establish foundational skills in critical appraisal, literature search, and evidence application [11,12,13]. Complementing formal curricula with accessible evidence synthesis platforms that provide time-efficient summaries of clinically relevant research can facilitate ongoing evidence-based practice [14].

Third, leveraging technology to create flexible, interactive online learning platforms can address barriers to time and geographic accessibility while maintaining educational quality [19,20,21]. Hybrid models that combine online theoretical content with periodic in-person hands-on workshops may optimize learning outcomes while minimizing barriers to participation.

Fourth, fostering interprofessional education and collaborative practice models will help dental professionals develop, team-based care delivery systems [23,24]. Creating opportunities for dental students and practitioners to learn with and from other health professionals can enhance collaborative competencies and broaden the understanding of the role of dentistry in comprehensive healthcare.

Fifth, workforce planning that addresses geographic maldistribution, creates incentives for rural practice, and ensures adequate support for ongoing professional development in underserved areas is critical for equitable access to dental care and educational opportunities [4,5]. Policy interventions, including subsidized continuing education for rural

practitioners, mobile educational units, and technology-enabled distance learning, can help to address these disparities.

Finally, strengthening quality assurance mechanisms for continuing dental education programs ensures that educational activities effectively enhance clinical competence and patient outcomes, rather than merely satisfying regulatory requirements [16]. The evaluation of continuing professional development should extend beyond participation metrics to assess learning outcomes, practice behavior changes, and ultimately, patient care quality improvements.

Conclusion

Continuing professional development and knowledge exchange are essential to maintain and enhance the competence of the rapidly expanding dental workforce in India. Current evidence reveals significant gaps between the importance of ongoing professional development and actual participation patterns, driven by barriers such as time constraints, financial burdens, and accessibility limitations. Evidence-based dentistry remains incompletely integrated into practice, and knowledge translation mechanisms require further strengthening.

The COVID-19 pandemic's digital transformation of dental education has revealed both opportunities and challenges, suggesting that hybrid learning models combining online flexibility with hands-on practical training may optimize continuing professional development. Professional networking and interprofessional collaboration are underutilized dimensions that warrant greater emphasis.

Advancing continuing professional development in Indian dentistry requires coordinated efforts encompassing regulatory frameworks, educational infrastructure, technological integration, and workforce planning. Addressing systemic barriers, enhancing evidence-based practice capabilities, and fostering collaborative learning environments are essential for ensuring that India's dental professionals can effectively meet evolving healthcare needs and deliver high-quality, contemporary care to all populations.

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