

Exploratory Study of Advertising the Dental Practice -An ethical perspective

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Abstract

Back Ground: Dentistry is a recognised noble profession. At the same time, it is a commercial enterprise, whereby dentists employ their skills to earn a living. There is a potential tension between these two aspects of dentistry and maintaining an appropriate balance between them is often difficult. An apparently more common technique for maximising income, often at the expense of other dentists, is advertising. Advertisements include any notice, circular, report, commentary, pamphlet, label, wrapper or other document, and any announcement made orally or by any means of producing or transmitting light or sound.

Objective: To understand the ethical perspective of advertisement in dental practice in an Indian scenario.

Methodology: Mixed method research Design was adopted for the purpose of the study. The qualitative data was collected on a convenience sample of 15 dental professionals by using an in-depth interview on the opinion about advertisement in dental practice .where as quantitative data was obtained from 250 random samples of dental professionals in Bangalore. A quantitative assessment was done using the questions “dentists using deceptive advertisement is ethical”, “advertisement will benefit practice by creating patient awareness”. The qualitative assessment was analyzed using grounded theory approach. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS software.

Results: The results showed that the dentists practicing in Bangalore agree the need for dental advertisement as it creates awareness but at the same time they are against using deceptive advertisements.

Keyword: Mixed method approach, advertisements, ethics, qualitative research, quantitative research

Date of Submission: 18-12-2017

Date of acceptance: 30-12-2017

I. Introduction

The practice of dentistry holds a special place in society as it is considered to be a noble profession relieving pain and suffering from people. People trust in dental professionals has in turn increased our responsibility. The ethical behavior of dentists is one of the most important factors in the promotion of quality dental care and recognition of dentists as professionals. The growth of science and technology over the last 20 to 30 years has increased the burden and competition among the dental professionals. The patients who used to accept the health professionals advice on health care today come to the dental clinics after getting all the required information in the internet. These changes have created a potential conflict among dental professionals. Also dentists have sought for different strategies for increasing their income. Advertisement is one marketing strategy to increase the dental practice.^{1, 2, 3}In a retrospective study done by Pacheco on ethical proceedings against dentist in Espirito Santo for infringements to the code of dental ethics. It demonstrated among 529 cases examined 39.7% was on illicit advertising.⁴Advertising or an advertisement means any communication made orally, in print, through electronic media or via the internet by or on behalf of a registered practitioner to the public in general or an individual that has its substantial purpose of promotion of the registered practitioner.⁵Advertising includes all forms of printed and electronic media, and includes any public communication using television, radio, newspapers, billboards, business cards, letterhead, telephone directory, professional directories, mobile communications and Internet Advertising also includes situations in which practitioners make themselves available or provide information for media reports, magazine articles or advertorials, including where practitioners make comment or provide information on particular products or services.⁶In recent years, it has come to be seen that advertising serves two legitimate functions. Enabling consumers to be aware of available services and encouraging differentiation between providers.⁷

Various national professional organizations have difference of opinion on advertisements. Few professional bodies have completely forbid advertisements and few have relaxed over a period of time.^{3, 5, 6} The Canadian Dental Association Code of Ethics states, "Dentists should build their reputation on their professional ability and integrity. Dentists should participate in health promotion programs that are in the best interest of the public and supported by the profession. Dentists shall conduct any promotional activity in accordance with acceptable professional standards and within applicable legislation."³ other dentists and convincing patients to undergo treatment, especially cosmetic procedures, that they do not need. Not only are these purposes harmful to other dentists and to patients but they reflect poorly on the dental profession as a whole. Dentist (Code of Ethics) regulations 1976 defines advertising directly or indirectly, for the purpose of obtaining patients or promoting his own professional advantage as unethical practice.¹ A dental surgeon is however permitted as an ethically acceptable practice to make a formal announcement in press regarding starting of practice, change of practice and address, about temporary absence and resumption of practice after a break of prolonged period, about the availability of new equipment or services without boastful claims of being the 'best' or 'first' especially if such services are already available in other facilities, Through insertion in telephone directories, yellow pages or on the internet websites is permissible as public information.^{1,5, 7} From a legal and ethical perspective, as long as medical practices do not sell or rent a patient's personal information practitioners can use different marketing technique to new and existing services to patients without breaking the law or ethical guidelines set forth by the professional bodies.⁸

A dentist who pays for advertising or marketing services by sharing a specified portion of the professional fees collected from prospective or actual patients with the vendor providing the advertising or marketing services is engaged in fee splitting. However, advertising is allowed and does not constitute prohibited fee splitting because the web service neither solicits the patient nor guarantees the purchaser will become a patient.⁹ Some organizations grant dentists fellowship status as a credential of membership in the organization such as "Fellow of the Academy of General Dentistry" (FAGD). Dentists are permitted to advertise such earned credentials so long as they avoid any communication that may imply specialization in an area of dentistry that is not recognized as a specialty, or attainment of an earned academic degree.^{1, 5, 6, 9} With this a study was carried on to understand the ethical perspective of advertisement in dental practice in an Indian scenario.

II. Methodology

This exploratory study was conducted after obtaining institutional ethical clearance. Mixed method research Design was adopted for the purpose of the study. The qualitative data was collected on a convenience sample of 15 dental professionals by using an open ended interview question on their opinion about advertisement in dental practice.¹ Eligibility criteria- dental professionals who are currently practicing dentistry and interested in research participation. For the quantitative data the sample size was determined using statistical sample software based on study population i.e. 23000 dental health professionals practicing in Bangalore, considering 5% standard error, 90% confidence interval. The sample size was determined to be 222 and considering 10% dropout the sample size is determined to be 247 and rounded off to 250. A quantitative assessment was done using the self administered structured questions like "dentists' using deceptive advertisement is ethical", "advertisement will benefit practice by creating patient awareness" and "I do condone global dental advertisement". The questions were answered on 5 point agreement scale. The qualitative assessment was analyzed using grounded theory, common coding and constant comparative technique was used.^{10, 11} The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS software version 21. Chi-square and Fisher Exact test were used as tests of significance. The level of statistical significance was set at $P \leq 0.05$

III. Result

The study participants was composed of 15 conveniently selected dental professionals who gave their opinion on advertisements in dental practice and 250 randomly selected dental professionals with an age group between 22 to 63 years old practicing in Bangalore. The response to the qualitative interview are summarized - Today's dental practitioners feel that advertisement is crucial for today's dental practice and stated "I feel the policy of advertising is not for today's scenario, dentistry is practiced in multistoried building and keeping only the small Name board is not sufficient. Using attractive colors and increase font is required so that it is visible to people", "Advertising can also be used as an education tool. It increases knowledge and awareness". General dental practitioners stated "Advertising make people aware of a clinic or specialty.", "In present scenario patients are in confusion among to which hospital or doctors are best and advertisement can create awareness". Even though they were not against advertisement they were against wrong advertising "Claiming superspeciality is misleading to the patients". One of the subject experts gave corporate culture as reason for change in

advertisement “In present scenario patients are in confusion among to which hospital or doctors are best and advertisement can create awareness”.

3.1 Summary of quantitative result

For the question related to advertisement creating patient awareness 207 (82.8%) of the dental professionals agreed. The study revealed that 47.1% of the participants disagreed the use of deceptive advertisements. Among male and female participants showed that male disagreed more about the use of deceptive advertisements and agreed that advertisement create patient awareness. Comparison of age showed between 31-40 years dental practitioners significantly agreed that advertisement create patient awareness and disagreed the use of deceptive advertisements. No significance differences were found between geographic locations. Specialist disagreed the use of deceptive advertisements. (Table 1 and 2)

Table 1- Comparison of participants considering advertisement create patient awareness with demographic variables

Advertising Create patient awareness	Agree		Disagree	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Male	119*	79.3	31	20.7
Female	88	88.0	12	12.0
Age Group				
22-30 Years	70	94.6	4	5.4
31-40 Years	117*	84.2	22	15.8
41-50 Years	20	71.4	8	28.6
50 and Above years	0	0	9	100
Years of Experience				
1-10 Years	138*	84.1	26	15.9
11-20 Years	57	87.7	8	12.3
21-30Years	12	57.1	9	42.9
Type of practice				
Specialty practice	62	78.5	17	21.5
General practice	145	84.8	26	15.2
Total	207	82.8	43	27.2
* p<0.05, test of significance using Chi square test				

Table 2- Comparison of participants considering using deceptive advertisement is unethical with demographic variables.

Deceptive advertisement is ethical	Agree		Disagree	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Male*	71	47.3	79	52.7
Female	36	36.0	64	64.0
Age Group				
22-30 Years	37	50.0	37	50.0
31-40 Years*	45	32.4	94	67.6
41-50 Years	20	71.4	8	28.6
50 and Above years	5	55.6	4	44.4
Geographic location				
Urban	95	41.3	135	58.7
Rural	4	100	0	0
Semi Urban	8	50	8	50
Years of Experience				
1-10 Years*	78	47.6	86	52.4
11-20 Years	16	24.6	49	75.4
21-30Years	13	61.9	8	38.1
Type of practice				
Specialty practice*	25	31.6	54	68.4
General practice	82	48.0	89	52.0
Total	107	42.9	143	47.1
* p<0.05, test of significance using Chi square test				

IV. Discussion

The qualitative study conducted on 15 practicing dental professionals emphasized the need for advertisement in dental practice as it created awareness and can be used as educational tool. As the clinics are situated in multi-storeyed buildings it required more advertisements. Also there is an increased competition among dental professionals which required the need to relax the norm for advertisements. Changes in the health care environment are forcing consumers to make more and more complex decisions. The rise of consumer directed health plans requires consumers to shop for and evaluate health care services. Providing support to consumers as they navigate the health care system can have positive results not only for individuals but for the health care system as a whole, since informed and knowledgeable consumers can encourage better system performance and quality through the decisions they make.² Advertising provide a means of conveying general information on the availability of services and procedures to consumers, helping them obtain a better understanding of services and options available, and enabling them to make informed health care choices.¹ While the practice of advertising is considered acceptable by most professional organizations, advertising, if used, must never be false or misleading. When properly done, advertising may help people better understand the dental care available to them and how to obtain that care. Advertising by a dentist must not: Misrepresent fact, Mislead or deceive by partial disclosure of relative facts, Create false or unjustified expectations of favorable results.¹² Quantitative data of the present study showed 82.8% of the participants agreed that the advertisements created patient awareness. But a lower rate was found in the study done by Rajani A Dable in her study 32.62% felt advertisement could be beneficial as it helps in communication. 47.1% opposed deceptive advertisements contradictory finding was found in study done by Rajani et.al were 83.68% of the dentist strongly opposed advertisements such as “Get teeth in one day and painless dentistry” which were regarded as unscientific and misleading. 51.06% of the respondents compiled with global advertising. In a study done by Kirankumar B Dhannappa 60% of the participants disagreed to advertising.^{14, 15} Men and younger dentist were in favor of advertisements. Which was similar in study done by Rajani et.al weremen (34.04%) were in more favor of advertisement than women. It clearly shows that attitudinal change is occurring as many of the younger dentists seems to favor advertisement.¹⁴

In a study done by SAT Porter and WL Grey on practicing dentists in Queensland were concerned by “extravagant, misleading claims which place unfair pressure on maintaining the loyalty of patients” There were no differences in the ethical dilemmas encountered by male and female dentists. However, there were some age related differences.¹³

V. Recommendations

Practitioners should always consider their professional ethical obligations and their legal obligations when advertising services. A Dentist or a group of Dentists may advertise provided that they maintain decorum, keeping in mind the high moral obligations and the value that society places on the important nature of their work and the moral character and integrity expected of them. Dental Surgeons are expected to exhibit integrity, honesty, fidelity and selfless service. Monetary commitments can only be secondary to the welfare of his patients. Persons who advertise services should always be aware that consumers of regulated health services may not be in a position to judge the merits of advertised services and products, and that they are more likely to hold a regulated health provider in some esteem, making them more vulnerable to believing the advertising claims.^{1,1} Practitioners should not advertise in a manner that could be considered as attempting to profit from or takadvantage of limited consumer understanding of the properties of medicines, other therapeutic goods or services.^{1, 6, 16} Because of the sensitivity of health-related information healthcare organizations should take *extra* precaution when using online strategies by using only an ‘opt in’ or ‘permission based approach’ approach.⁸

VI. Conclusions

The study showed that the dentists practicing in Bangalore agree the need for dental advertisement as it creates awareness but at the same time they are against using deceptive advertisements. Healthcare advertising should be done on service-based social strategy and should be structured to specific needs. Social marketing is an opportunity but should be cautious and be used judiciously

Acknowledgements

Authors would like thank all the dental practitioners who participated in the study

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*Kemperaj VM. "Exploratory Study of Advertising the Dental Practice -An ethical perspective." IOSR Journal of Dental and Medical Sciences (IOSR-JDMS) 16.12 (2017): 62-66