

DENTAL SURGERY IN INDIA: THE BITTER TRUTH



Harshika (name changed) had fond dreams of becoming a dentist when she enrolled herself in a private dental college in Punjab. But, she was unable to either set up her own clinic or find a suitable job as dentist despite the BDS (Bachelor of Dental Surgery) degree she holds. Reluctantly, she has taken up a job in a private pharmacovigilance company in the city.

Shiksha (name changed) too had been nursing an ambition to become a dentist. But, due to absence of opportunities, she was unable to realise her dream and was forced to join a multinational drug research company, which not only offered her a job, but also a decent pay package.

These two are among the hundreds of BDS graduates in different parts of Punjab who have deviated from their chosen profession to join the workforce in various multinational firms besides call centres and medical transcription companies.

The high costs involved in establishing dental clinics in urban areas that are already concentrated with dentists appear to be forcing the BDS graduates to look outside their vocation for a rewarding career.

"I need at least Rs. 5 lakh to establish a clinic with the necessary dental equipment and minimal interiors. Besides, dentists are found in every nook and corner of the city and it takes a long time for any dental clinic to become established and begin drawing patients. Till then, how will I be able to pay the rent for the clinic and the EMIs for the loan?," said another BDS graduate, who has dropped the idea of setting up his own clinic and is hunting for a stable job.

"There are far too many dentists concentrated in urban areas such as Chandigarh. It is a problem of plenty. Even if the BDS graduates arrange for the funds and start a clinic, the returns will not commensurate with the investment at least for the first few years," said a professor at a private dental college of Punjab.

Concurring with this, a dentist with a clinic near Mansa Devi Complex said he has to keep his consultation fee less than Rs. 50 to attract patients.

"There are many dentists who offer free consultation, hoping to make up in the treatment they would be able to offer subsequently. But, most dentists do not charge more than Rs. 50 for consultation. "I barely make Rs. 15,000 per month after two years of practice. Out of this, I need to pay the rent for the shop and maintain the clinic by purchasing the necessary dental care items," he said.

Hence, most of them scout for teaching opportunities in dental colleges.

Though there is a provision for recruiting BDS graduates as tutors in dental colleges, the openings are difficult to come by and the remuneration is a measly Rs. 6,000 to Rs. 9,000. The Dental Council of India (DCI) has prescribed a minimum qualification of MDS (Master of Dental Surgery) for appointment as lecturer in dental colleges.

A professor at a private dental college said the curriculum for BDS courses is tailor-made for practicing dentistry. "It does not equip the graduates with teaching skills," he opined.

A BDS graduate can enter the teaching profession only if he or she takes up MDS. But, MDS seats are few in number and can accommodate barely 15 to 20 per cent of all BDS graduates. Only financially well-off students can fork out the exorbitant donation and fees.

DCI member S.M. Jaykar has said that a way out of the impasse for BDS graduates is paving the way for their employment as dentists in primary health centres (PHCs). The government is coming forward to employ dentists in PHCs situated in rural areas of the State. "BDS graduates do not go to rural areas and set up clinics. The poor awareness of oral health care in rural areas will make the venture financially unviable."

Dental colleges are mushrooming, the number of under graduate seats in the existing colleges is being increased, the number of dental graduates is increasing in leaps and bounds, but there hardly seems to be any serious thinking regarding the future and profitable employability of a dental graduate. The pay packet of a lecturer in a private dental college in some metropolitan cities of our country is in fact less than that of a skilled labourer. Unless stringent steps are taken to regulate the number and quality of graduates being registered, the situation is going to worsen and BDS may be reduced to the status of a basic degree from that of a professional degree.



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