

**DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF A
CURRICULUM FOR TEACHING RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION
SKILLS IN DENTISTRY**

by

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PREFACE

“Medicine (dentistry) is not only a science, but also the art of letting our own individuality interact with the individuality of the patient” - Albert Schweitzer

The interview between dentist and patient is central to clinical dentistry. Such an interview is critical, taking only a few minutes for the dentist to establish a meaningful relationship with the patient. A dentist's behaviour, apart from clinical performance, may often be the most important aspect of the dentist-patient relationship. Thus a dentist needs to understand the individual patient, and most importantly, be able to communicate this understanding to the patient.

In view of the emerging, competitive South African dental market which is characterised by:

- (i) a rapid decline in the funding of oral care;
- (ii) patients' need for comprehensive dentistry that is not reflected in their demand for such, and
- (iii) the cost structure of the average dental practice, the dentist-patient relationship is a crucial factor that has an influence on the viability of the average dental practice in South Africa (SA).

However, a knowledgeable, clinically competent dentist is not enough to ensure a viable practice particularly if communication difficulties between dentist and patient become an obstacle. This would prevent the dentist from discovering the exact cause of the patient's problem or alternatively, from discussing a treatment plan that the patient can fully understand and wishes the dentist to implement. Hence, the need for a dentist to enter the market with a competitive advantage (for example the ability to maintain a quality interaction with the patient) and as a result, to create a loyal patient who is prepared to invest in comprehensive dentistry. Comprehensive dentistry comprises all the clinical disciplines of dentistry, namely restorative dentistry and prosthodontics, aesthetic (cosmetic) dentistry, preventative dentistry, orthodontics, periodontics and surgery.

The School of Dentistry, University of Pretoria, recently implemented an outcomes-based curriculum. Although the curriculum is based on a bio-psycho-social approach, the clinical training and learning emphasises the “bio” aspects of the application of knowledge by means of the clinical reasoning process. As a result, almost no attention is given to the psychosocial educational needs.

Although communication skills were identified as a cross-field outcome to be achieved by dental students, students did not receive any formal communication skills training.

The School’s quest to innovate, to be locally relevant and internationally competitive, as well as to train scientific and humanistic dental physicians, will only be met if the curriculum develops students’ interpersonal skills that will facilitate effective and empathic relationships with patients. To enter the competitive dental market with a competitive advantage (the ability to engage in a quality interaction with the patient) is a recipe for success. Communication skills education should therefore become an essential part of dental students’ undergraduate training.

With appropriate communication skills, the South African dentist will hopefully be empowered to meet the challenges in a dynamic and challenging South African dental market. As a result, the following prerequisites for a viable practice can be envisaged:

- An increase in the number of patients who have an *appreciation* for
- dentistry;
- An increased *loyalty* among patients towards the dentist;
- An increase in the *demand* for comprehensive dental care by patients;
- An improvement in the *viability* of a dental practice.

With the above in mind, a curriculum in relational communication skills was developed, implemented and evaluated that will foster dental students’ relationships with their patients. This curriculum in relational communication skills is an attempt to equip dental students at the University of Pretoria with relational communication

skills that will empower them to create a loyal patient who is prepared to enjoy a long-term, viable relationship with them as their dentist.

ABSTRACT

A private dental practice, in order to be viable, requires patients who are loyal, dentally educated, and, as a result, prepared to invest in comprehensive dentistry. However, a vital, yet often underestimated prerequisite for creating such a patient, is the dentist's ability to communicate effectively with the patient. The *aim* of this study was to develop, implement and evaluate a curriculum in relational communication skills for third year dental students.

The *methodology* employed during the study enhanced a student-centered, problem-oriented learning approach by means of an experiential learning strategy complemented by a didactic teaching strategy (ATF-strategy). The ATF-teaching strategy was *designed* in a pre- and post-training cycle:

- (i) Affectively stimulate students: video recordings and evaluation of third year dental students' base line relational communication skills with a standardised patient (SP);
- (ii) Presenting the theory: developing students' relational communication skills by means of a didactic lecture and role playing a structured interview with peers;
- (iii) Opportunity to functionalise the skills: role playing a structured interview with a SP and evaluation of students' newly developed relational communication skills by means of an assessment rubric and video recordings and -feedback.

The *subjects* in the study were third year dental students (n = 67). The following *instruments* were employed: a case study of a clinical scenario was used to role-play an interview with a SP. The SP used a "rubric", representing the six dimensions of the required relational communication skills, as an assessment instrument to provide descriptive feedback to each student. The "dentist's" feedback was a questionnaire completed by each student about his/her experience as "dentist" during the interview with the SP.

The “patient’s” feedback was a questionnaire completed by the SP about his/her experience as “patient” during the interview. A study guide, describing the evidence behind relational communication skills training, as well as the relational communication skills required, was developed and a copy was issued to each student.

Quantitative and qualitative *results* were obtained.

- (i) Quantitative results: both male and female students, as well as the class as a whole, scored significantly higher during training cycle 2 compared to training cycle 1 ($p < 0.0001$) for five of the six dimensions of the rubric (except Dimension: “Opening the interview”). This confirms the effectiveness of the teaching strategy to develop third year dental students’ relational communication skills. Both male and female students rated the appropriateness of the teaching methods employed during the study, rather highly (4.18 and 4.26 on a five-point Likert scale, respectively);
- (ii) Qualitative results: the “dentists’” feedback showed that by role-playing a structured interview, students’ confidence to interact in a relaxed way with the “patient” was enhanced. Furthermore, the important roles of trust, empathy and active listening in establishing a meaningful relationship with a patient, were emphasised by most of the students.

It is *concluded* that the ATF-teaching strategy employed for teaching third year dental students relational communication skills, proved to be an effective strategy and was perceived by the students as a valuable and appropriate strategy.

SAMEVATTING

Die lewensvatbaarheid van 'n tandheelkundige praktyk is afhanklik van lojale, tandheelkundig opgevoede pasiënte wat bereid is om in omvattende tandheelkundige sorg te belê. 'n Essensiële, maar onderskatte voorvereiste vir die skepping van 'n lojale, tandheelkundig opgevoede pasiënt wat bereid is om in omvattende tandheelkundige sorg te belê, is die tandarts se vermoë om doeltreffend met die pasiënt te kommunikeer. Die *doel* van die studie was om 'n kurrikulum in verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede vir derde jaar tandheerkunde studente te ontwikkel, implementeer en evalueer.

Die *metode* wat gevolg is, het 'n student-gesentreerde, probleem-georiënteerde opleidingsbenadering beklemtoon deur middel van ervaringsleer aangevul deur 'n didaktiese opleidingstrategie (ATF-strategie). Die ATF-opleidingstrategie was ontwerp in 'n voor- en ná-opleidingsiklus:

- (i) Affektiewe stimulering van studente: video opnames en evaluering van derde jaar tandheerkunde studente se basislyn verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede met 'n gestandaardiseerde pasiënt (SP);
- (ii) Aanbied van die teorie: ontwikkeling van studente se verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede deur middel van 'n didaktiese lesing en rolspel van gestruktureerde eweknie-onderhoude met klasmaats;
- (iii) Geleentheid om vaardighede te funksionaliseer: rolspel van 'n gestruktureerde onderhoud met 'n SP en evaluering van studente se nuut-ontwikkelde verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede deur middel van 'n assesseringsrubriek en video opnames en -terugvoer.

Die *subjekte* in die studie was derde jaar tandheerkunde studente ($n = 67$). Die volgende *instrumente* is aangewend gedurende die studie: 'n Gevalstudie wat 'n kliniese scenario verteenwoordig was gebruik om die onderhoud met die SP te rolspeel. Die SP het 'n "rubriek", wat die ses dimensies van die vereiste verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede verteenwoordig het, as assesseringsinstrument gebruik ten einde beskrywende terugvoer aan elke student te verskaf.

Die “tandarts” se terugvoer was ‘n vraelys wat deur elke student voltooi is omtrent hul ervaring as “tandarts” gedurende die onderhoud met die SP. Die “pasiënt” se terugvoer was ‘n vraelys wat deur die SP voltooi is omtrent haar ervaring as “pasiënt” gedurende die onderhoud. ‘n Studiegids wat die getuienis uit die literatuur beskryf het, asook die vereiste verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede, was ontwikkel en ‘n kopie was aan elke student voorsien.

Kwantitatiewe en kwalitatiewe *resultate* is ingesamel.

- (i) Kwantitatiewe resultate: beide manlike en vroulike studente, sowel as die klas as geheel, het betekenisvolle hoër tellings behaal tydens die tweede opleidingsiklus ($p < 0.0001$) ten opsigte van vyf van die ses dimensies van die rubriek (behalwe Dimensie: “Open die onderhoud”). Dit bevestig die doeltreffendheid van die opleidingstrategie om derde jaar tandheelkunde studente se verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede te ontwikkel. Beide manlike en vroulike studente het die toepaslikheid van die opleidingsmetodes hoog aangeslaan (4.18 en 4.26 op ‘n vyf-punt Likert skaal, onderskeidelik);
- (ii) Kwalitatiewe resultate: die “tandarts” se terugvoer het aangedui dat deur ‘n gestruktureerde onderhoud te rolspeel, studente se selfvertroue om gemaklik met die “pasiënt” interaksie te hê, versterk is. Voorts is die belangrike rol van vertroue, empatie en aktief luister, vir die vestiging van ‘n verhouding met ‘n pasiënt, deur die meeste studente beklemtoon.

Ter *samevatting*, die ATF-opleidingstrategie wat tydens die studie aangewend is om derde jaar tandheelkunde studente op te lei in verhoudingskommunikasievaardighede, het getoon dat dit ‘n doeltreffende strategie is en is deur die studente as waardevol en toepaslik ervaar.

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