

Importance of Arts and Humanities in Dental Education

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For the last 30 years, medical and dental education has evolved drastically. We have come a long way from informal apprenticeships to formal discipline/ problem-based teachings, from blackboards to audio/visual aids.¹ In the fourth century, Aristotle made the world recognize the importance of arts for understanding the complexities of human nature and behaviour.² Hundred years later, John Dewey advocated that “If education is life, all life has, from the outset, a scientific aspect, an aspect of art and culture, and an aspect of communication”.³ He debated that clinicians are in a uniquely suitable environment to integrate science and the humanities, and advised that school curricula should mirror real life.⁴ In his report, Albert Flexner emphasized a balance between 'empiricism' and 'humanity'. He suggested that medical students would perform better if they were culturally experienced before they joined a medical school.⁵ In 1983, Donald Schon, in his book “The reflective practitioner”, challenged clinicians to reevaluate the role of technical knowledge versus artistry in the development of professional excellence.⁶

Experts believe that arts and humanities impart interpretation and subjectivity which can enhance critical thinking and foster creativity in individuals.⁷ They believe that teaching 'humanities' can inculcate experiential learning in students and they will have a more holistic approach towards patient treatment.⁸

In developed countries like the UK, Canada and USA, medical educationists throughout have recognized its value and have started introducing arts and humanities

in the medical curriculum.⁵

Multiple studies have endorsed the notion that this approach to learning may enhance students' resilience, clinical observations, reflective practice and communication skills.^{9,10}

Kings College London is the pioneer of introducing these terms in Dental education. They believe that with the advancement of dental technology, the use of haptics and simulation is excessively increasing. With the increasing array of treatment modalities and diagnostic tools, patient expectations are increasing as well. In this overwhelming, competing global era, we cannot overlook the importance of complex decision making, the ambiguity of practice, communication skills, lateral thinking and we need to balance the scientific advances with improved observational, analytical, reflective and patient-centred skills.

Despite the advocacy of including 'arts and humanities in medical and dental education, there is still a deficiency in the literature on the contents of this curriculum and its valid assessment. Kings College introduced a six-week course of 'Clinical Humanities' for BDS where students were exposed to art, poetry, ceramics and drama and were asked to describe their thoughts and viewpoints regarding different topics and finally, students participated in roleplay. The course enhanced students' experiential learning and reflective practice. They were also able to relate art with dental procedures and were able to view dentistry from an artistic point of view.

Whether or not we can replicate such a design in Pakistan is a far-fetched question. This piece was written to introduce an idea in the multiverse of knowledge. With changing times. Traditional teachings are becoming obsolete. Our dental curriculum, in its true sense, teaches and assesses hard skills and technical knowledge, whereas the success of a dentist relies more than 70% on his/ her soft skills. We hope that soon, with assistance from government and regulatory bodies, we

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will be able to think about a structured course to enhance the soft skills of our graduates.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

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