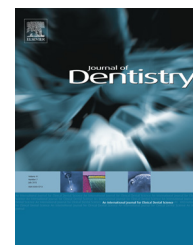


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Dental implants in the eyes of the public: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Dental implants have become a popular option for treating partially dentate or edentulous patients. Information on dental implants is widely available in the public domain and is disseminated through industries and dental practitioners at various levels/disciplines. This qualitative study aimed to evaluate the public's information acquisition and their perceptions of dental implants and the effects of these on their care-seeking and decision making.

Methods: A purposive sample of 28 adults were recruited to join six focus groups. To be eligible, one must be 35–64 years of age, had never been engaged in dentally related jobs, had at least one missing tooth, and had heard about dental implant but never received dental implant or entered into any dental consultation regarding dental implants. All of the focus groups discussions were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic content analysis following a grounded theory approach.

Results: Participants acquired information on dental implants through various means, such as patient information boards, printed advertisements, social media, and personal connections. They expected dental implants to restore the patients' appearance, functions, and quality of life to absolute normality. They regarded dental implants as a panacea for all cases of missing teeth, overestimated their functions and longevity, and underestimated the expertise needed to carry out the clinical procedures. They were deterred from seeking dental implant treatment by the high price, invasive procedures, risks, and complications.

Conclusions: Members of the public were exposed to information of varying quality and had some unrealistic expectations regarding dental implants. Such perceptions may shape their care-seeking behaviours and decision-making processes in one way or another.

Clinical significance: The views and experiences gathered in this qualitative study could assist clinicians to better understand the public's perspectives, facilitate constructive patient–dentist communication, and contribute to the creation of positive clinical experiences in implant dentistry.

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1. Introduction

Dental implants are considered to be one of the most important innovations in contemporary dentistry.¹ Since the introduction of titanium implants for intra-oral use in the late 1950s, dental implantology has become one of the most active and promising areas in dentistry and is a popular option for the oral rehabilitation of partially dentate or edentulous patients.¹ The growing popularity of dental implant therapy has also led to an increase in the numbers of dentists trained in implant dentistry and the prosperity of the dental implant industry, with a projected annual growth rate of 20%.^{2,3}

Osseointegrated dental implants are often preferable to conventional dentures for several reasons, such as the preservation of the structure of adjacent teeth and better comfort, aesthetic outcome, functions, and stability.^{4,5} In particular, for patients who are not able to adapt to conventional dentures or who have compromised local host bone, dental implant treatment offers a solution that may generate more satisfactory outcomes.^{6,7} The reported 10-year survival rate is approximately 90%, making it a fairly predictable modality of treatment.⁸

Despite the advantages, dental implants are not a panacea for all cases of missing teeth, and clinical success is only possible when the treatment plan is based on a thorough assessment of the patient's condition and careful consideration of the indications and contraindications.⁸ Some risks are involved and possible complications can occur during the surgical and post-surgical phases and in the long term.⁹ In addition, the patient's daily self-care habits, such as maintenance of good oral hygiene and abstinence from smoking, are essential for the longevity of dental implants.¹⁰

Information on dental implants is now widely available in the public domain.⁵ Patients may also receive information from the industry and practitioners at different levels (general practitioners and specialists) and in various dental disciplines. Thus, the general public may be confronted with confusing information that they acquire from various sources. Because of the complexity of dental implantology, information received from different sources may not always reflect evidence-based empirical data.¹¹ The exposure of the public to such information may form a basis for their perceptions of dental implants and affect their intentions to consider dental implants as a treatment option when the need arises. In addition, such information may influence their communications with dentists and their decision-making between the different treatment options.

Research on patients' perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction with dental implant treatment predominantly draws upon quantitative methods, such as questionnaire surveys and the measurement of clinical outcomes.¹² More recently, qualitative methods have been introduced into dental implant research and have generated valuable insights.^{13,14} As an important complement to quantitative methods, qualitative research can capture a wide range of views and experiences and help to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives.¹⁵ Rather than generating numbers and statistics, qualitative studies interpret the deep meaning of the

informants and report the themes in a rich context using their own words.¹⁵ In a recent qualitative study, semi-structured interviews with nine patients revealed that "normality" was their main motivation for and expectation from dental implants.¹³ Patients expected implants to restore their life to "normal," although their definitions of normality differed. In another qualitative study, patients favoured implant-supported overdentures rather than conventional dentures because they provided better functional improvement and increased social confidence.¹⁴

Previous qualitative studies in dental implantology only involved patients who had undergone dental implant treatment or consulted a dental practitioner about the possibility of replacing their missing teeth with dental implants.^{13,14} Nevertheless, how the general public were exposed to information on dental implants before entering into such a consultation with a dentist, how they processed such information, how the information shaped their perceptions of dental implants, and how such perceptions may have influenced their future intentions to seek dental implant treatment remain unknown. This qualitative study aimed to probe these questions to understand (i) the general public's information acquisition on dental implants, (ii) their knowledge of dental implants, (iii) their perceptions of dental implants (the treatment process, treatment outcomes, and the advantages and disadvantages compared with traditional treatment modalities), and (iv) their care-seeking behaviours and decision making with regard to dental implant treatment.

2. Methods

2.1. Recruitment of participants

The protocol of this study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Hong Kong/Hospital Authority Hong Kong West Cluster. Ethical approval was obtained (#UW 13–086). A purposive sample of adults were recruited from two community centres located in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, respectively. These community centres organise a wide variety of activities throughout the year, such as family support, career enrichment, educational programmes, cultural events, sports, leisure activities, and tours. The members enrolled in these centres span a wide variety of age groups, occupations, and social strata. To be eligible to join this study, one must fulfil the following criteria: (a) be 35–64 years of age, (b) be a Hong Kong resident, (c) be a fluent Cantonese speaker, (d) never been engaged in dental jobs or related industries, (e) have at least one missing tooth, (f) have heard about dental implants, and (g) never received dental implant treatment or consulted a dental practitioner about the possibility of replacing their missing teeth with dental implants. Both genders were eligible to join. Eligible participants who gave their written informed consent were then assigned into focus group sessions based on their preferred and/or available timeslot. The recruitment of participants was terminated when data saturation was reached, i.e., when no new facts or views were recorded during the thematic content analysis.¹⁶

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