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Dental specialty, career preferences and their influencing factors among final year dental students in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract *Objective:* The purpose of this study was to investigate evolving trends in dental post graduate specialty preferences and career aspirations among final year dental students in Saudi Arabia.

Materials and methods: A cross sectional survey using a self-administered questionnaire was conducted among final year dental students from seventeen universities in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire enquired about socio-demographic details and the ranking of three of their best preferences among the list of specialties/general dentistry and career options. They were also enquired about their opinion regarding the total time required to become a dentist and their intention to go for further studies abroad. The questionnaire assessed factors influencing their choices using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from extremely important to not important. Binary logistic regression to examine the combined effect of several independent variables on the likelihood of choosing a dental specialization/general dentistry and career option were analyzed.

Results: The overall response rate was 64.6%. Restorative and Aesthetic Dentistry was the most preferred specialty ($n = 98$; 17.7%) followed by Endodontics ($n = 78$; 14.1%); Prosthodontics ($n = 65$; 11.7%) and Orthodontics ($n = 63$; 11.4%). The two most preferred careers were 'Civilian dentist in public sector' followed by 'Academic services dentist'. Overall, students reported that the influence of family members in the dental profession, preference for private practice and specific interest in patient population as the most important factors in choosing a specialty/general den-

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tistry. Intellectual content of the specialty was ranked the least important. On the other hand, the most important factors for choosing a career were variety of non-clinical duties, access to child care facilities and research opportunities.

Conclusion: The results of this study show the top preferred specialties and career choices which can be a baseline for establishing national policies and for the improvement of graduate programs. There seems to be a need to promote mentoring activities and provide guidance and encouragement to pre-doctoral dental students in selecting the most appropriate specialty within their capability domain.

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1. Introduction

The factors influencing the choice of a dental profession are very important in terms of identifying the expectations of the profession (Folayan et al., 2014). Several studies have reported that the majority of the undergraduate dental students prefer to continue their education toward a specialty degree (Sofola et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2005; Weaver et al., 2002). This has important implications for the dental workforce planning agenda in any country. With an increase in demand for dental treatment and with an increase in supply of dental schools, a striking balance between dental needs and supply is inevitable.

In 1987, Saudi Arabia had 3 dental schools, and the total number of dentists was 786; the dentist-to-population ratio was 1:8906 (Shalhoub and Badr, 1987). According to 2014 Ministry of Health statistics, there were 12,785 dentists in Saudi Arabia, dentist rates per 10,000 population was 4.11 and the dentist-to-population ratio was 1:2666 (MOH, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, each university offers a six-year dentistry program that includes a one-year internship. The new applicants to the respective universities participate in a one-year preparatory course after which, based on their grade point average (GPA), they are admitted to a medical, dental or other allied college (Halawany, 2014).

To the best of our knowledge, there are only limited number of studies conducted on dental specialty and career preferences in Saudi Arabia. One institutional study conducted in Saudi Arabia reported that among 532 male (1982–2004) and 545 female graduates (1984–2006), 77% and 54% respectively successfully completed their postgraduate dental education (Al-Dlaigan et al., 2011, 2012). Furthermore, in another study which explored preferred specialties among Saudi dental students, the most popular specialty among the male students was oral maxillofacial surgery (20.1%) and among female students was operative dentistry (23.4%) (Halawany, 2014).

Several factors have been described in the dental literature concerning the choice of a career in dentistry. Factors such as social standing and high professional status (Crossley and Mubarik, 2002); higher social status and income (Crossley and Mubarik, 2002; Hallissey et al., 2000; Vigild and Schwarz, 2001); ability to be self-employed (Hallissey et al., 2000; Jover et al., 2006); artistic nature of the career (Hallissey et al., 2000; Jover et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2005; Vigild and Schwarz, 2001); helping people (Dal Poz et al., 2006; Hallissey et al., 2000; Stewart et al., 2004; Vigild and Schwarz, 2001) and general interest in dentistry (Orenuga and da Costa, 2006; Stewart et al., 2004) have been reported as the most important factors influencing their choice of

career. However, the demographic characteristics of a population is also an important determinant which influences the motivations and career expectations among dental students (Bernabe et al., 2006; Khami et al., 2008; Orenuga and da Costa, 2006; Scarbecz and Ross, 2002; Winter and Butters, 1998).

As the previous study addressed career motivations, perceptions of the future of dentistry and preferred dental specialties among Saudi dental students (Halawany, 2014), the authors of the current study attempted to investigate evolving trends in dental specialty and career choices. Consequently, the aim of the study was to evaluate the specialty and career preferences and their influencing factors among final year dental students in Saudi Arabia.

2. Materials and methods

This study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the College of Dentistry Research Center, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (CDRC registration number IR0125) on October 27, 2014 and was undertaken with the understanding and informed consent of each participant according to the ethical principles of the World Medical Association Declaration.

A cross sectional study was chosen as it would represent and suffice the objectives of obtaining the information required for this study. The target study population was final year dental students enrolled in all dental schools across Saudi Arabia. The addresses of all dental schools in Saudi Arabia was retrieved and checked whether they have final year students in order to approach them to conduct this survey. On doing so, information obtained suggested that 7 dental colleges had students that did not reach the final year at the time of conducting this survey and hence were excluded. Based on gathered information, the overall sample size of $n = 1005$ students reflected the total final year students from the participating dental schools. After obtaining permissions from the Institute Vice Dean of Academic Affairs of each of the 11 public and 6 private dental schools, the questionnaires were distributed. The purpose of the survey was given to the participants written on the introductory page of the questionnaire.

A responsible student from each of the 17 dental schools was contacted and assigned as the contact person for correspondence during the survey. An 11-item paper and pencil type of questionnaire was developed after a comprehensive review of literature. A pilot study of the questionnaire in English language was conducted with a group of 25 randomly selected

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