

# Patients' Perception about Professionalism in Dental Practice: Experience in a Southwestern Tertiary Institution

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** When individuals have negative perceptions about dental care, they refuse to seek treatment which leads to worsened conditions. The interactions with patients attending the various dental clinics revealed some dissatisfaction with the quality of service delivered. The objective of this study was to assess the perception of the patients about the dentists and dental nurses.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted for a period of three months among old and new patients attending the Oral Diagnosis, Periodontology, Orthodontic, Oral Surgery, Conservative, Prosthetic and Paedodontic Clinics at the dental centre, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The data was collected using an English-language questionnaire and analysed using the IBM SPSS Software version 23.

**Results:** There were 228 participants, majority were females (55.4%) and belonged to the 56 years and above age group (20%). The patients agreed (40.6%) and strongly agreed (32.1%) that the first impression they had of their dentist affected their confidence in him/her. More than half of the patients (52.7%) reported they were particular about the physical appearance of their dentist and 84.3% preferred their dentist to be professionally dressed. Greater than half of the patients (64.1%) and almost half (46.2%) claimed that their overall experience with their dentist and dental nurse was excellent respectively.

**Conclusion:** It was observed that the patients were not particular about the demographics of the dentists or dental nurses but placed more emphasis on appearance, behaviour and skills which ultimately influenced their overall experience and perception.

**Keywords:** Patients' perception, Professionalism, Dental practice

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## INTRODUCTION

Human beings draw conclusions by extracting information about one another in a process that appears automatic and obligatory. Among the information spontaneously drawn from just viewing the static image of a person are social categories such as race, gender and age; personality traits like trustworthiness and competence; emotion; identity; and intentions.<sup>1</sup> Perception is the ability to see, hear or become

aware of something through the senses. It is the way in which something is regarded, understood or interpreted. The affective component of the doctor-patient relationship perceived by patients are vital precursors to their commitment to the clinician. It also affects their decisions to turn to unqualified people for treatment and even their willingness to proceed with malpractice litigation against the clinicians.<sup>3</sup>

The word professionalism was derived from the Latin word "Professus" and means "to have declared publicly". It is a broad concept and represents adherence to the values and individual practices in certain disciplines such as religion, law or medicine.<sup>4,5</sup> The core of successful dentistry depends on a good Dentist-Patient relationship because it is a major determinant of satisfaction among patients and also an important factor in dental anxiety.<sup>6</sup> There are several factors that influence the health-seeking behaviour of patients which may hinder or facilitate professional health care. It has been discovered that when the expectations of patients are met, their satisfaction increases which has an effect on their behaviour by improving oral health habits and influences better use of dental services.<sup>7</sup>

In England, Furnham et al.<sup>8</sup> reported that within the confines of professionalism, patients found the following aspects very important: professional certification, professional experience, personal traits such as gender, age, race, among others. In contrast, a study conducted by Dimatteo et al.<sup>9</sup> in the United States found that the professional's ethical behaviour, a good diagnosis, quality treatment and the dentist's communication skills are the most important factors for patients. Historically, dental activity was very basic and was even used as a form of punishment and torture in some cultures;<sup>10</sup> as a consequence, pain is one of the negative perceptions people have about dentists.<sup>11</sup>

Patients stated that the ideal dentist should have good professional and communication skills, be friendly, trustworthy, supportive and be concerned with prevention.<sup>9</sup> Since patient-dentist communication improves the rate of success in future treatments, dentists should also adapt their technical discourse by limiting the number of professional terms used and momentarily adjust to the patient's language and way of speaking.<sup>12</sup>

In the last few decades, patients have become critical consumers with high hopes which lead to greater levels of dissatisfaction when treatments do not meet these expectations.<sup>11</sup> Some low-income individuals believe that dentists are more interested in the money they make with little concern for public health services. This belief is because of the high cost of dental care due to expensive dental equipment and materials.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the patients' perceptions about the dentist due to the earlier mentioned factors, judgments are also made from the dental services they receive by the interaction between the service providers which include the dentists and the dental nurses. The dental nurse is an essential member of

the dental team and their role is important in terms of how the dental experience is viewed. To perform well as service providers and also improve the satisfaction of the patients, the dental nurses need to be knowledgeable, well-motivated and satisfied with their position.<sup>14</sup>

In our environment, a few studies<sup>15,16</sup> in other disciplines of medicine have been carried out to disclose patients' perceptions about health care. The interactions with patients revealed dissatisfaction after being attended to in the dental surgery. Therefore, this study has set out to assess their perceptions about the dental service providers (dentists and dental nurses) which ultimately may reveal the factors responsible for satisfaction in service delivery in our institution and to implement them as much as possible.

The aim of this study was to assess patients' perception of the physical appearance, behaviour and skill of the dentist and dental nurse and how it affected their overall experience in the dental clinic.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a cross sectional study conducted in the oral diagnosis, periodontology, orthodontic, oral surgery, conservative, prosthetic and paedodontic clinics of the Dental Centre, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Oyo state. The Leslie Kish formula<sup>17</sup> for cross sectional studies used in a similar study<sup>18</sup>, was applied to arrive at a sample size of 229. The proportion measured in this study to calculate the sample size was 11.0% which was the proportion of subjects from a previous report.<sup>19</sup> The patients were recruited via convenience sampling. All consecutive old and new patients that presented to the Oral Diagnosis, Periodontology, Orthodontic, Oral Surgery, Conservative, Prosthetic and Paedodontic Clinics in the dental centre within the period of three months and met the selection criteria were recruited. The inclusion criteria were all patients below age 18 years whose parents gave consent to participate in the study, those between the ages of 18 and 70 years who consented to participate and with the mental capacity to understand the study. The exclusion criteria were patients with medical conditions affecting their mental capacity and those who did not or whose parents did not consent to participate in the study. The study was well explained then informed consent was obtained from each patient and the parents or guardians of the patients under 18 years of age. The questionnaire design was adopted from a previous study<sup>20</sup> and administered to each patient to fill. Interpreters were provided for patients who

did not understand the English language. A one-day pre-test of the questionnaires was carried out by administering to 22 patients that presented at all the clinics and necessary adjustments were made prior to the commencement of the study. However, this pre-test was not part of the main study.

The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections. The first section contained the bio data, the second section; the perception of the patients about the dentist and the third section; the perception of the patients about the dental nurse. The second and third sections had three sub-sections each, which assessed the appearance, behaviour and skills of the dentists and dental nurses in the listed order. The Likert scale with 5 options was provided for each question/statement. At the end of each major section, a 4-point Likert scale consisting of excellent, good, fair and below average was used to assess the patients' overall perception about the dentists and dental nurses. The data obtained was

analyzed using the IBM SPSS version 23. Descriptive statistics and percentages were used to report the parameters.

**RESULTS**

Two hundred and twenty nine questionnaires were distributed and 228 were returned. Two-hundred and twenty-three participants included their gender, 220 filled their ages and educational levels while 223 and 225 provided information regarding their ethnic groups and religions respectively. There were more (55.2%) females than males (44.8%). The least (1.4%) of the 220 participants who filled their ages were below 10 years while the highest (20%) number of participants belonged to the 56 years and above age group followed closely by the 18 to 25 years and the 26 to 35 years age groups which had a proportion of 19.5% each. Most (78.2%) of the participants had tertiary education, a large proportion (84.8%) of them were Yoruba and majority (84%) were Christians (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of socio demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristics	n (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	100 (44.8)
Female	123 (55.2)
<b>Age group (years)</b>	
<10	3 (1.4)
10-17	14 (6.4)
18-25	43 (19.5)
26-35	43 (19.5)
36-45	33 (15.0)
46-55	40(18.2)
56 and above	44 (20.0)
<b>Educational level</b>	
Primary	13 (5.9)
Secondary	32 (14.5)
Tertiary	172 (78.2)
Others	3 (1.4)
<b>Tribe</b>	
Yoruba	189 (84.8)
Igbo	17 (7.6)
Hausa	3 (1.3)
Others	14 (6.4)
<b>Religion</b>	
Christianity	189 (84)
Islam	35 (15.6)
Others	1 (0.4)

Table 2: Perception about the physical appearance of the Dentist

Patients' Perception about Professionalism in Dental Practice ...

Perception about the physical appearance of the Dentist	Strongly disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly agree n (%)
My first impression of my dentist affected my confidence in him/her	18 (8)	26 (11.6)	17 (7.6)	91 (40.6)	72 (32.1)
My dentist's physical appearance affected my anxiety level	29 (13.4)	66 (30.6)	57 (26.4)	46 (21.3)	18 (8.3)
My dentist's physical appearance affected my confidence level in him/her	30 (13.5)	45 (20.2)	41 (18.4)	63 (28.3)	43 (19.3)
I was particular about my dentist appearance	11 (5.0)	29 (13.2)	64 (29.1)	73 (33.2)	43 (19.5)
Was your dentist professionally dressed?	1 (4.0)	3 (1.3)	7 (3.1)	68 (30.2)	146 (64.9)
Do you prefer your dentist to be professionally dressed?	0 (0)	3 (1.3)	32 (14.3)	70 (31.4)	118 (52.9)
Was your dentist dressed casually?	111 (50.7)	78 (35.6)	12 (5.5)	10 (4.6)	8 (3.7)
I do not mind if my dentist wears casual clothes	5 (24.3)	55 (24.3)	61 (27.0)	37 (16.4)	18 (8.0)
I don't mind if my dentist is extravagantly dressed	66 (29.3)	61 (27.1)	59 (26.2)	27 (12.0)	12 (5.3)
Did your dentist smell nice?	6 (2.7)	5 (2.2)	41 (18.2)	97 (43.1)	75 (33.3)
Do you mind if your dentist keeps facial hair?	28 (12.6)	36 (16.1)	110 (49.3)	39 (17.1)	10 (4.5)
Were you particular about the gender of your dentist?	57 (25.3)	38 (16.9)	98 (43.6)	19 (8.4)	13 (5.8)
Would you prefer a dentist of your gender?	44 (19.5)	39 (17.3)	114 (50.4)	15 (6.6)	14 (6.2)
Would you prefer a dentist of the opposite gender?	38 (17.0)	35 (15.6)	121 (54.0)	23 (10.3)	7 (3.1)
Were you particular about your dentist's religion?	68 (30.2)	40 (17.8)	100 (44.4)	7 (3.1)	10 (4.4)
Were you particular about the tribe of your dentist?	73 (32.2)	46 (20.3)	96 (42.3)	7 (3.1)	5 (2.2)
Would you prefer an older dentist?	26 (11.5)	24 (10.6)	121 (53.3)	32 (14.1)	24 (10.6)
Would you prefer a younger dentist?	25 (11.1)	32 (14.2)	134 (59.3)	24 (10.7)	10 (4.4)
Would you prefer a dentist of your age group?	42 (18.5)	33 (1.5)	125 (55.1)	18 (7.9)	9 (4.0)

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A high percentage (40.6%) of the participants agreed that their first impression affected their confidence in the dentist. About half (52.7%) of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they were particular about the physical appearance of their dentist while 47.6% stated that it affected their confidence in him/her. A large (64.9%) proportion of participants strongly agreed that their dentist was professionally dressed and majority (84.3%) preferred them to be professionally dressed. However, only a few (24.4%) of them did not mind if their dentist put on casual clothes or were extravagantly dressed (17.3%). Most of the participants agreed (43.1%) or strongly agreed (33.3%) that their dentists smelled

nice while almost half (49.3%) of them were neutral about their dentists keeping facial hair. Many of the participants were neutral about the gender (43.6%), religion (44.4%), tribe (42.3%) and age (59.3%) of their dentist (Table 2).

None of the participants disagreed with the fact that the dentists were courteous and friendly while most (86.36%) either agreed or strongly agreed that dentists were punctual. A large percentage agreed (44.5%) and strongly agreed (47.1%) that their dentist had a good rapport with the dental nurse. Only very few of them disagreed with the point that the dentists used dental terms and avoided slangs (Figure 1).

Majority of the participants strongly agreed that the dentists displayed good skill in the area of explaining the procedure thoroughly before proceeding (56.2%), answering all their queries regarding the procedure (55.8%), maintaining adequate infection control (51.8%), showed confidence while carrying out the procedure (59.8%), were patient with them (57.5%) and displayed effective time management while attending to them (48.4%) (Table 3). The overall assessment of the experience with their dentist was excellent by the largest (64.1%) proportion of the participants (Figure 2).

About a third (37.1%) of the participants agreed that their first impression was affected by the appearance of the dental nurse. Half of the participants claimed that the dental nurse (DN) was professionally dressed while 46.3% preferred a professionally-dressed DN. A good proportion (78.4%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed to the assisting DN being casually dressed at work. A little above a third (35.5%) of the participants did

not want the DN extravagantly dressed and 40.6% agreed that the DN smelt nice while majority were neutral concerning; the presence of facial hair in the male DN, the gender, preference for same or opposite gender, religion, tribe or age of the DN (Table 4).

Majority of the participants strongly agreed to the DN in attendance being of good professional conduct in terms of respectfulness, friendliness and exhibiting a good rapport (Figure 3).

A high proportion of the participants agreed to the DN displaying good skills as regards knowledge of what he/she was to do, confidence while assisting the dentist, availability when required, adequately setting up the dental surgery for the procedure and preparing the patient by draping (Figure 4).

In the overall experience of the participants with the dental nurse, most (46.2%) claimed it was good followed by excellent experience and a very low (0.5%) proportion claimed their experience was below average (Figure 5).

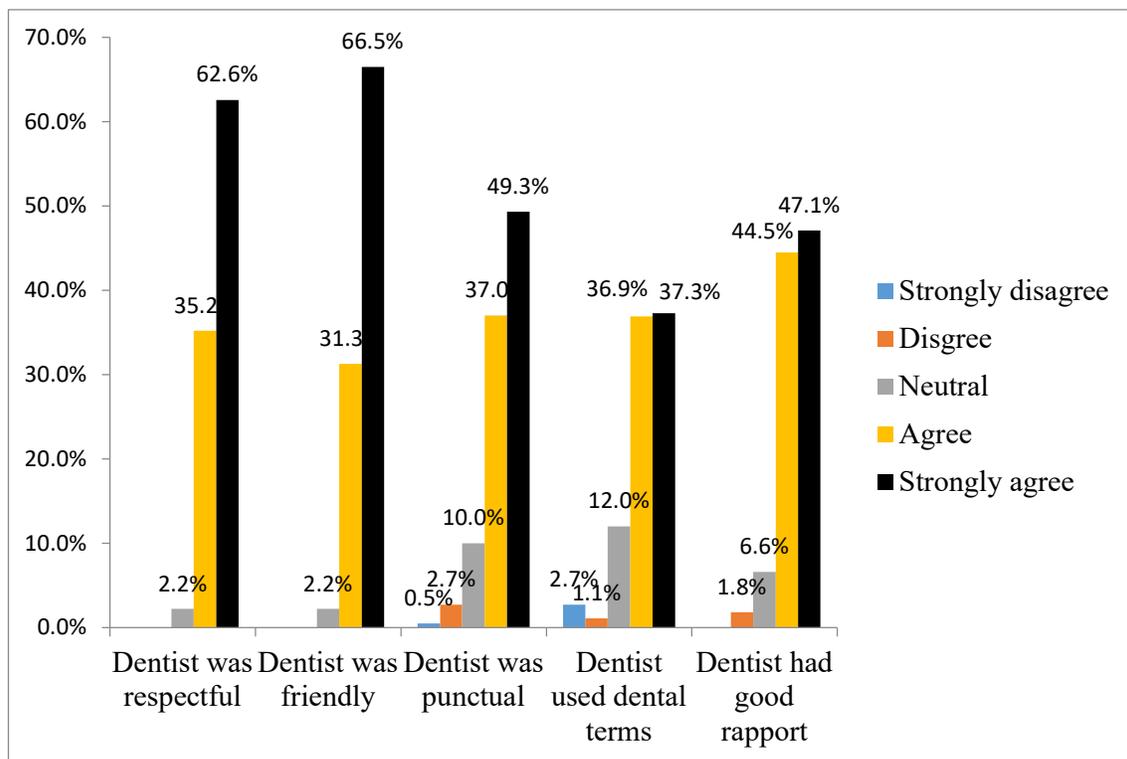


Figure 1: Perception about the behaviour of the dentist

Table 3: Perception about the skills of the dentist

Perception about the skills of the dentist	Strongly disagree n(%)	Disagree n(%)	Neutral n(%)	Agree n(%)	Strongly agree n(%)
Did your dentist explain the procedure thoroughly and clearly before proceeding?	1(4.0)	4(1.8)	5(2.2)	89(39.4)	127(56.2)
Did your dentist answer all your queries regarding the procedure?	0(0.0)	2(9.0)	11(4.9)	86(38.4)	125(55.8)
Did your dentist maintain adequate infection control and did he/she keep the work environment tidy?	0(0.0)	1(4.0)	8(3.5)	100(44.2)	117(51.8)
Did your dentist display confidence while carrying out the procedure?	0(0.0)	3(1.3)	4(1.8)	83(37.1)	134 (59.8)
Did your dentist reassure you during the procedure?	0(0.0)	2(9.0)	9(4.0)	95(42.2)	119(52.9)
Was your dentist patient with you?	1(4.0)	5 (2.2)	11 (4.9)	79(35.0)	130(57.5)
Did your dentist display effective time management while attending to you?	1 (0.4)	4 (1.8)	24(10.7)	87(38.7)	109(48.4)

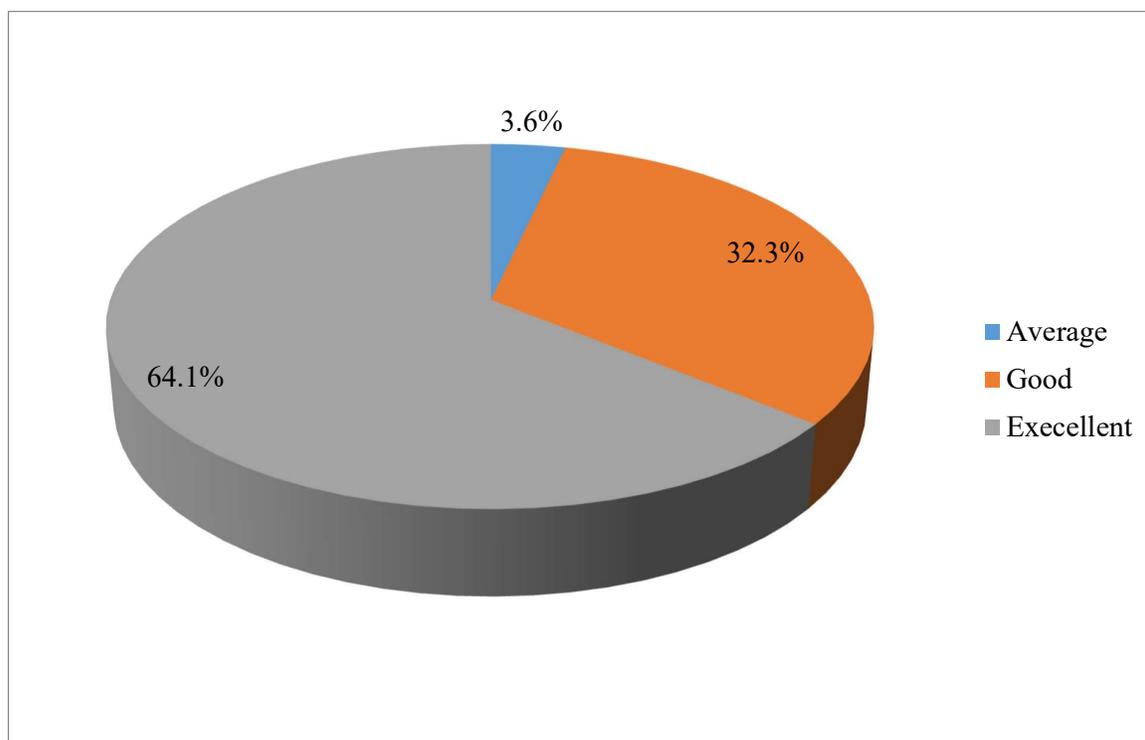


Figure 2: Overall assessment of Patients' experience with their dentist

Table 4: Perception about the appearance of the dental nurse

Perception of appearance of the dental Nurse (DN)	Strongly disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)
My first impression of my DN was affected by his/her appearance	13 (6.2)	33 (15.7)	56 (26.7)	78 (37.1)	30 (14.3)
Was the DN professionally dressed	2 (0.9)	4 (1.9)	14 (6.5)	108 (50)	88 (4.7)
Do you prefer a professionally dressed DN?	0 (0)	0 (0)	38 (17.4)	101 (46.3)	79 (36.2)
Was the DN casually dressed	78 (36.6)	89 (41.8)	21 (9.9)	14 (6.6)	11 (5.2)
I don't mind if the DN wears casual clothes	64 (29.5)	70 (32.3)	55 (25.3)	20 (9.2)	8 (3.7)
I don't mind if the DN is extravagantly dressed	77 (35.5)	60 (27.6)	59 (27.2)	14 (6.5)	7 (3.2)
Did your DN smell nice?	1 (0.5)	5 (2.3)	74 (34.1)	88 (40.6)	49 (22.6)
Would you mind if your DN keeps facial hair?	34 (15.8)	39 (18.1)	111 (51.6)	19 (8.8)	12 (5.6)
Were you particular about the gender of your DN?	36 (16.7)	45 (20.8)	114 (52.8)	16 (7.4)	5 (2.3)
Were you particular about the religion of the DN?	43 (19.8)	53 (24.4)	107 (49.3)	11 (5.1)	3 (1.4)
Were you particular about the tribe of the DN?	47 (20.6)	47 (20.6)	114 (50.0)	5 (2.2)	3 (1.3)
Would you prefer a DN of your sex/gender?	35 (16.1)	39 (18.0)	123 (56.7)	16 (7.4)	4 (1.8)
Would you prefer a DN of the opposite sex/gender?	31 (14.4)	42 (19.4)	122 (56.5)	13 (6.0)	8 (3.7)
Would you prefer an older DN?	23 (10.7)	28 (13.0)	132 (61.4)	21 (9.8)	11 (5.1)
Would you prefer a younger DN?	21 (9.8)	29 (13.6)	133 (62.1)	25 (11.7)	6 (2.8)
Would you prefer a DN of your age group?	27 (12.6)	34 (15.8)	127 (59.1)	20 (9.3)	7 (3.3)

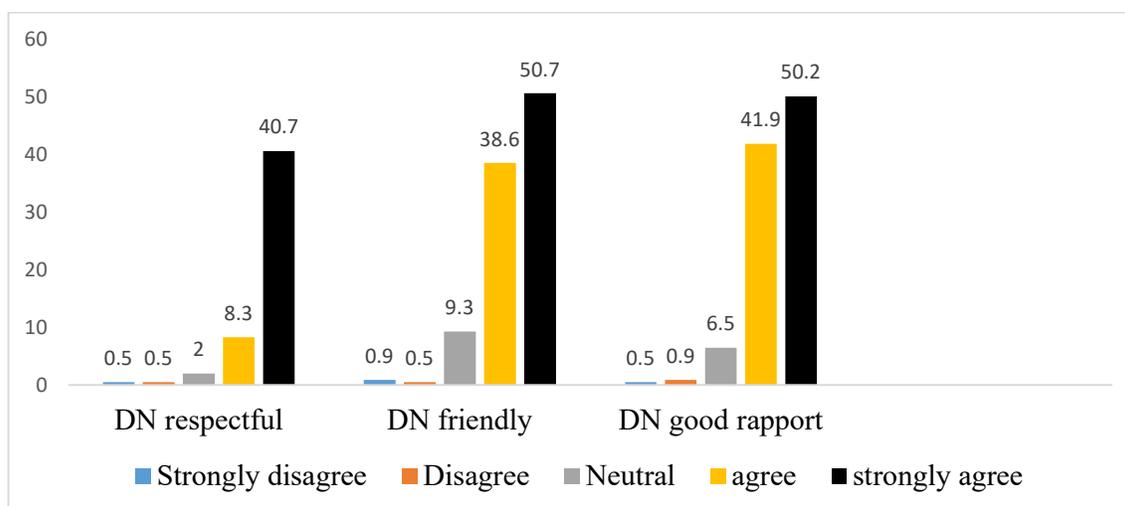


Figure 3: Perception about the behaviour of the dental nurse

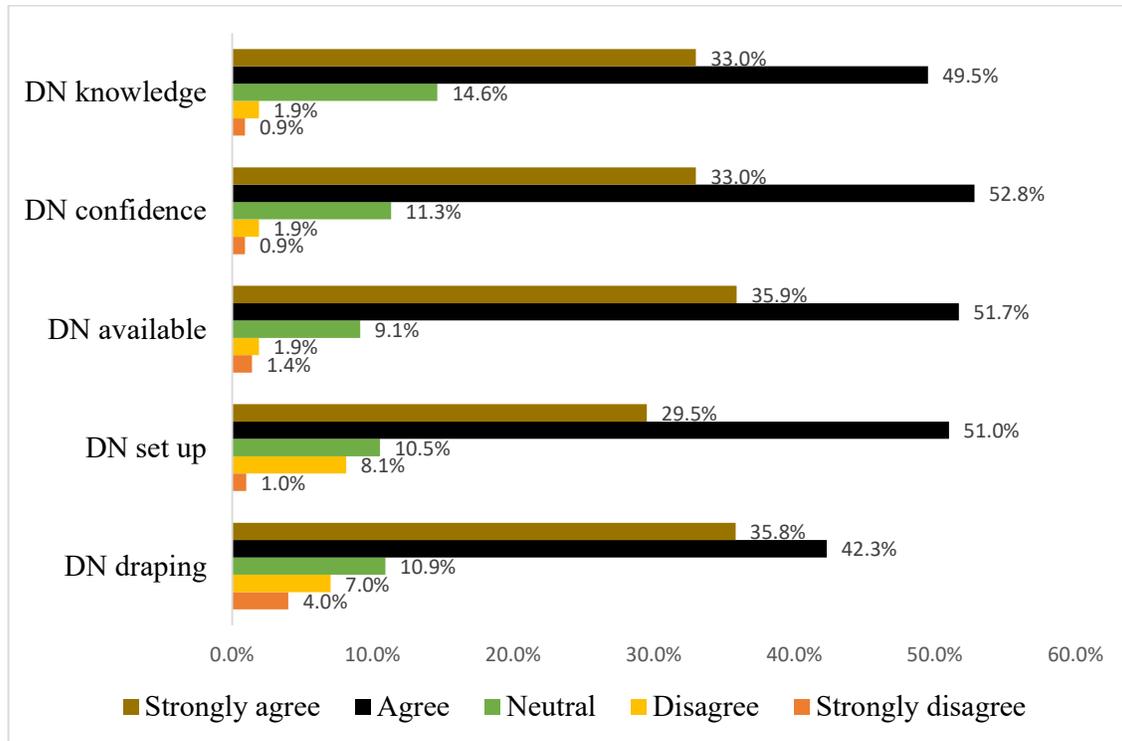


Figure 4: Perception about the skills of the dental nurse

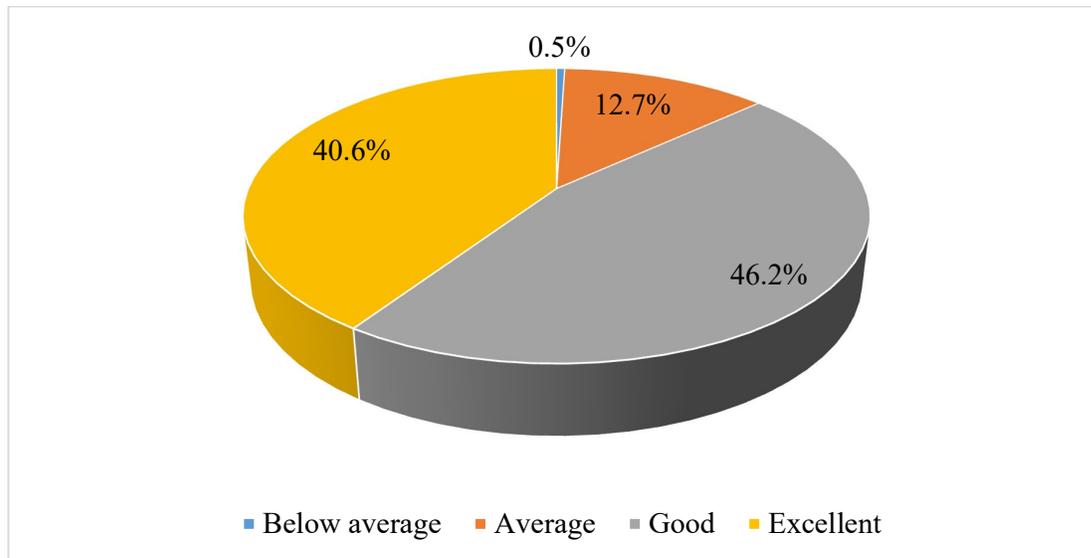


Fig 5: Overall assessment of the experience with the dental nurse

**DISCUSSION**

A patient's expectation, satisfaction, compliance with dental treatment and perception about the dentist's capability is mostly influenced by his or her first impression.<sup>21</sup> In 1985, Taylor P.G.<sup>4</sup> stated that the patient's first impression of the physician has a strong impact on the perception of the

professional's skill level and expectation of care in the future. From the time a patient schedules an appointment and gets treated, he or she should have derived maximum satisfaction from the level of care rendered.<sup>22</sup>

An important aspect of professionalism is creating a sense of patient's comfort and confidence in the

clinician during treatment.<sup>20</sup> A positive attitude from the clinician can enhance the exchange of information with the patient leading to a more efficient and improved delivery of care.<sup>4</sup> It is also important that dentists and dental nurses have a clear understanding of their working relationship to create a harmonious working environment which in turn provides a pleasant and friendly atmosphere for the patient.<sup>14</sup>

The demographic profile of the clinician has been shown to affect patient's preference.<sup>23,24</sup> In this study, the majority of the participants were neutral as regards the age, gender and ethnicity of their dentist and dental nurse (Tables 2 and 4). This may be as a result of the participants being more particular about the skills of their dentist. A similar result was obtained in a study by Shah et al.<sup>25</sup> where it was reported that the patients were more particular about the professional and positive conduct of the clinician over their ethnicity. Whereas, it was reported in some studies<sup>24,26</sup> that patients preferred clinicians of the same ethnicity as it enhanced patient-clinician communication. Other studies<sup>23,27</sup> showed a preference for clinicians of the same gender especially when intimate health issues were involved.

As regards the age of the clinician, some studies reported patients' preference for older clinicians possibly because of their better interpersonal skills and more experience as compared to the younger ones. In contrast, other studies<sup>8,28</sup> stated that patients had a higher preference for younger clinicians as they felt they were more up-to-date with newer techniques and advanced technological equipment.

Patients have been shown to have a stereotypic idea of how clinicians should dress which portrays professionalism, enhances more positive responses from the patients and improves doctor-patient relationship. Clinicians have been advised on their mode of dressing since the time of Hippocrates due to hygienic or functional reasons while psychologists and sociologists have stated the importance of physical appearance and its effect on first impressions.<sup>29</sup> A clinician who is carefully dressed is seen as meticulous, knowledgeable and compassionate whereas an unkempt appearance may portray disorganization.<sup>20</sup> This was the case in this study where majority of the patients strongly preferred a professionally dressed dentist and dental nurse while they strongly disagreed to a casually-dressed dentist and dental nurse. This result is in agreement with the study by Petrilli et al.<sup>30</sup> where it was reported that 53% of the patients were particular about their physicians' attire with the professional white coat as the preferred dressing.

In this study, majority of the participants agreed that confidence in their dentist and dental nurse was affected by their first impression and his/her physical appearance while majority strongly disagreed to an extravagantly-dressed dentist and dental nurse. This may be due to the anticipated perception of people in this part of the world about the medical professionals. Another study<sup>20</sup> also reported similar results where the patients preferred a well-groomed healthcare professional which enhanced their willingness to discuss health-related issues.

Concerning the professionals' behavioural approach, patients place a high value on a respectful and caring attitude of their clinician and are of the belief that a service based on respect, empathy and categorization is a highly professional one. These values influence the relationship between the patients and their clinicians and ultimately their overall experience. In this study, majority of the patients strongly agreed that their dentist was friendly, respectful, had a good rapport, was punctual and avoided the use of slangs while communicating with them. The same was seen in the case of the dental nurse where majority strongly agreed that the dental nurse was respectful, friendly and of a good rapport.

The skills of the dentist as demonstrated in exhibiting infection control, being confident in carrying out the procedure, having good time management, expressing good knowledge of the job and that of the dental nurse in setting up the instruments adequately and getting the patient set for the procedure, all contributed to the overall impression of the patients. The patients' observation of strong agreement that both their dentists and the dental nurses display of good skills is similar to a study by Brosky et al.<sup>20</sup> where 80% of the patients agreed that the dental students who attended to them showed good professional skills. A South African study<sup>31</sup> reported that 99% of the patients agreed that the dental students displayed good skills in carrying out dental procedures. The above referenced studies done on the professionalism in dentistry reported the clinical skills of the undergraduate dental students but no particular reference was made to the clinical specialists. This shows that despite the pressures the dentists and dental nurses are constantly facing, they still displayed good professional skills. In this present study, the overall experience with the dentist and dental nurse was said to be excellent by 64.1% and 46.2% of the patients respectively which is in line with a study by Pallepati et al.<sup>4</sup> where 73.7% of the patients reported satisfaction with the dental services rendered.

**CONCLUSION**

It was observed that the patients were not particular about the demographics of the dentists or dental nurses but placed more emphasis on appearance, behaviour and skills which ultimately influence their overall experience and perception. It is heart-warming that the overall perception of the patients about the dental professionals is excellent. This goes a long way in the general management of the patients by this group of medical professionals in our environment.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The dentists and dental nurses should be aware of the personal factors that impact their patients' perceptions as well as improve on them where necessary.

Workshops and regular training on courses relating to professionalism should be included in the curricula for the dental professionals and students-in-training so as to enhance patient care which goes beyond addressing their presenting complaints.

**Source of Support**

Nil.

**Conflict of Interest**

None declared

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