Dental practitioners keen to use technology to develop their practice

The first dental college in India was set up in Kolkata in 1920. The first private dental college was set up in 1965 and I had the opportunity to study at that hallowed institution. Today the Manipal College of Dental Surgery (MCODS) is a top ranked private dental college in India. While dental education is focused on how to treat patients, very few institutions educate their students on how to set up and run their dental practices successfully. In current times, where healthcare models are undergoing a paradigm shift, the dental practice has no option but to join this journey. However, many dentists feel handicapped by their lack of knowledge in this area. I was no different and learnt on the job to figure out how to make decisions that could ensure my practice remained relevant to patients.

The second edition of our dental management survey is an effort to help dentists understand how better to seize the opportunities they have today and grow their practice. Our findings indicate that recently qualified dentists as well as established dentists struggle with running their practices efficiently. This calls for a relook at some of the key management principles being employed by dentists in India.

Technology plays an important part of our lives today and a dental practice that doesn’t adopt technology is unlikely to remain relevant. In this regard, our survey indicates that dentists are slowly adopting social media as well as desktop based technology for practice management and patient outreach, while continuing to remain reliant on paper based records.

Our team also spoke to some dentists to understand their key priorities and increasing patient flow and continuing dental education featured high on the list. Dentists are keen to increase the size of their practice, build a brand and raise aware awareness about dental hygiene among patients. To do so, they feel the need to learn about new procedures such as implants so they can serve patients better. Interesting India has a dental surgeon to patient ratio that favors dentists. According to the WHO the ideal dentist to population ratio is 1:7500. According to the World Health Statistics, 2014, the ratio in India is 1:10000 in urban areas and 1:1.5 Lakh in rural areas.

While dentists in India continue to work through these challenges, their counterparts in the west have been adopting these principles for some time. The Middle East, for example, has been adopting digital technology in healthcare for a while now. In Kuwait all patients have unique medical record numbers and identifiers help the health ministry to keep track of key health parameters including dental parameters. India is also moving in that direction with the government introducing digitization in all spheres of life.

I hope this report will help dentists make better decisions in their journey to grow and manage their practice. As always, I look forward to your feedback and support.

Dr. Vikram Venkateswaran
Founder and Managing Editor, Healthcare in India

Profile of respondents

Close to 60% of respondents had less than five years of experience; 30% had between 5 and 10 years of experience and the rest had over 15 years of experience

71% were private practitioners and the rest were practicing as part of a dental chain or hospital
Key findings

Do you use management and technology tools?

Yes – 72%

The tools most commonly used by dental practitioners were

- Dental Management software: 42%
- Microsoft Excel: 42%
- Practo: 39%

Tools on top of the mind recall of dental practitioners were

- Facebook: 96%
- YouTube: 86%
- Practo: 75%

What do dental practitioners use technology for?

- Patient education: 36%
- Appointment management: 28%
- Storing dental images and X-Rays: 26%

Over 78% of respondents felt technology could be used to market their clinic and its facilities to patients, particularly international patients (49%) and to collaborate with fellow dental practitioners (51%).

Close to 62% of respondents want to partner with third parties to use technology to improve their practice.
Leveraging digital tools to grow your dental practice: 3 Considerations

#1 Where to deploy tools? – For marketing or cost optimization efforts?

The answer depends on the primary business objectives for the practice. For most new and emerging practices, the focus should be on gaining patients. Growing revenues, investing in improving patient targeting, patient education and branding become key objectives. At this stage, our recommendation is for most dental surgeons to look at tactics like Digital Marketing, Social Media and platforms like Practo. While the platforms can be chosen based on the target patients’ social media presence, the messaging also needs to be tailored to patients. This is where we have often seen a disconnect.

For the purpose of this survey, we analyzed over 2000 social media conversations (available publicly) among dentists in the Pune region over 6 months and found that a majority of conversations were happening on Facebook. While this is understandable considering many patients are active on Facebook, the challenge lay in what was being discussed. The topics were centered on continuing dental education and implants, with only a handful of conversations around topics like improving dental hygiene and maintaining dental health, which are more relevant to patients. Predictably, there was very little patient engagement.

For established practices looking to deploy technology, the focus needs to be on improving operational efficiencies. We believe that larger more established practices can benefit from a Customer Relationship Management software such as Sugar CRM, Zoho CRM or Kreato CRM. These platforms can help record and analyze daily transactions and over time, the data can be used to rationalize the practice’s portfolio. This could help identify profitable areas which the dentist can choose to channel investments in. In our experience, we have seen dentists focus on mature offerings such as removable partial dentures, which while providing stability in revenues, may leave little scope for future growth.
#2 Paid tools versus free tools

Today most businesses utilize digital tools. The Healthcare industry is not far. Most small and medium sized medical practices have access to cloud based tools, that help them manage their brand and seek operational efficiencies. While most practitioners tend to start off with free tools, it is important to understand the value one can get from free and paid tools. In our experience, the following three considerations can help determine which type of tool may be the most beneficial to dental practice management.

1. **Dedicated strategy and budget**: If you want to accelerate your growth and have seen patient appetite to consume content in digital formats – online, on their app etc – then a dedicated budget is important to build a digital strategy that includes paid tools. Ideally, you may want to start by using free tools to understand how patient data is being stored in the backend and what type of analysis is possible with it. Over time, you may need dedicated staff to monitor patient data and help with the analysis. If your patient population is growing at over 30% annually, we would recommend you opt for paid tools as free tools have a tendency to be limited to small data sets.

2. **Patient Base Maturity**: When using digital tools for brand building and patient education, we recommend using paid tools, if the patient base is digitally savvy. This is because paid tools provide better support to create and post content online, including in multiple formats like videos, text, images, as well as on multiple platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others. They also provide a more streamlined mechanism for patient engagement.

3. **Patient Data Privacy and Integrity**: Paid tools tend to have better privacy and security features. These days medical records are very valuable to hackers as they can be sold for a premium on the dark web. If you have a dedicated budget for strategy and a digitally savvy patient base, opting for paid tools will be a better option.

#3 Evaluating tools - When do you need to change?

The effectiveness of your online tools is directly linked to your practice management strategy. It is important to change your tools when they are no longer effective. To determine when that happens, the below criteria may be considered.

1. **Growth in Influence**: One of the best measurement criteria’s is if these tools are helping you grow your influence among patients and peers. Are you being recognized as a credible source of information in the area that you are sharing content online? Klout score is a way to understand if your influence has grown and you should keep a constant watch on the same. Tools that don’t help you with insights on how to improve your influence should be re-evaluated for effectiveness.

2. **Developing Patient Personas**: Are you able to gain insights from your patient data? Are you able to identify your top patients and does your current tool help you develop personas that will help you better understand the stated and unstated needs of your key patients? If not, it may be time to consider other tools.

3. **Practice growth**–If your investments in tools are not helping you grow by at least 20% in value and 5-10% in patient volume beyond organic growth, it is time to revisit the investment.
Taking Dental Management to the next level: Role of the Indian Dental Association

The Indian Dental Association (IDA) is an authoritative, independent and recognized voice of dental professionals in India. They are committed to public oral health, ethics, science, and advancement of dental professionals through its initiatives in advocacy, education, research and development of standards. More than 50,000 dentists are members of IDA and it has more than 300 branches across the country.

The vision of the IDA is “Optimal National Oral Care for All by 2020” and in line with that they have launched many public Dental health programs. Additionally, the IDA has been working on improving the adoption of management principles and technology among the dental professionals in India. In our 2016 report on the state of dental practice management in India, we had mentioned how the IDA was working on improving and educating dental professionals on the use of social media. This has helped immensely as almost 90% of dental practices surveyed for this report said they had a Facebook page.

The IDA uses conferences, exhibitions, classroom sessions and webinars to educate members and dental professionals to adopt management practices. One of the programs for example is titled “Overall Excellence Classroom programme” and looks at key areas like Practice Management, Applicable Laws in Practice, Records Management, Medico-Legal Aspects of the Practice, Finance, Marketing, PR, and Operations. The course also teaches soft skills to the dentists along with how they should handle stress at work and tips on nutrition. Healthcare in India works closely with IDA to help dentists in these areas.

About Healthcare in India

Healthcare India is a research and analysis firm that looks at emerging technology trends in India and its impact on the healthcare ecosystem. We publish reports, talk to healthcare leaders and participate in events across the country to understand emerging technologies and how it can be used to create a new model for care in India. For more information, please contact

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