

Women in Dentistry

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Growing up I used to be really terrified of Dentists and as I do some introspection into why that may have been, one reason may be the fact that at that time there were not too many female dentists in practice, with whom I may have established some empathy. In fact, I have had more than five extractions and all were done in theatre, not because they were complicated cases but simply because my anxiety levels were just too high.

Why then did I choose a career in Dentistry, one may well ask? And this is a question I still get asked today. I have some challenge in answering... perhaps it is because when you are passionate about something the reasons do not matter anymore. The answer borders somewhere between passion ...or actually wanting to help people who may be as terrified of dentists as I was, to get over their genuine fear. I have actually received good feedback from my patients in this regard.

The earliest evidence of a female dentist is Emeline Roberts Jones who became the first woman to practice dentistry in the United States. She married the dentist Daniel Jones when she was a teenager, and became his assistant in 1855.

Women form an increasingly important part of the dentally trained workforce in South Africa. However, little is known about the professional issues and work-related problems affecting women dentists, according to an abstract which was published in the August 2005 issue of the SADJ.

A treatise submitted by Rajeh reported that women dentists are less likely to be married and to have fewer children.¹ Women are more likely to assume child rearing and household responsibilities.¹ They are less likely to be practice owners, work slightly fewer hours per week and weeks per year, and are more likely to take a leave of absence for illness or child rearing. However, women dentists demonstrate a far greater professional work commitment than was previously reported in the literature. Women earn significantly less income from the practice of dentistry, even after controlling for age, practice ownership, hours worked per week, and other personal characteristics.

As much as these results are from almost 30 years ago, the same phenomena still exist today according to my observations. This may be the reason why many female dentists find themselves being exploited (even by other women) and being subjected to poor conditions of employment.

Of course, I understand that the negative working conditions may not only befall women, however women are affected in larger numbers. A good example is that of a particular doctor who had completed her Dentistry degree in 2017. She called my office and was very emotional. This was because after her Community Service she decided to go into partnership with an established and experienced Dentist. They went 50/50 on the start-up capital, and the agreement was that the senior doctor would deal with the claims as well as the financial distribution. To make a long story short, the junior doctor realised, three to six months into the business, that she was being seriously short changed. The senior doctor was telling her that they were not making enough profits when she, the senior partner, was pocketing most of the money!

This and other stories make the industry unbearable for most women and frequently they end up leaving the profession, or joining universities. Lack of support from government resources may also be a reason for their abandoning the profession. I mean, one spends five years learning the art and craft of Dentistry so that you are able to practice and also teach people the benefits that a dentist can provide, only to find that because of cost cutting mechanisms, society is deprived of comprehensive medical care. This can be frustrating at times and may lead to professionals exploring other options.

I think that most dentists undertake studies in the field because they have a passion for the discipline, but also because it is a profession which, at least until recently, provides job security. Now if the latter is taken into consideration and conflated with the above factors affecting women, it may be seen that women in the profession are placed in a very compromising situation which may result in many leaving the profession. Women are innate nurturers. Dentistry requires a lot of that skill to be able to nurture those who are in pain. It would be a sad day indeed for me if I were to see women in large numbers being so despondent that they are leaving the profession. Sadly however, this is a growing phenomenon.

I am a strong believer that as women we should not wait for the males to help us in overcoming our challenges. We need to support each other and look out for each other. This I say because we have a new generation of professionals who need to be welcomed and retained in the profession.

Reference

1. Rajeh, M. Female dentists: their professional lives and concerns. Coll Dent. 1991 Fall; 58(3):12-8.