

Commoditization of dentistry

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Abstract

Dental field has changed a lot in past decades and its direct impact is visible if we study the different aspects of dental treatment in today's world. Patient care and healthcare provision have changed along with a change in mindsets of people practicing medicine. In this article we discuss this very phenomenon i.e. the commoditization of dentistry and both its good and bad aspects.

Keywords: Commoditization, Dental Ethics, Patient care.

Introduction

A few weeks back my sister had pain in tooth and I told her she should go to my dentist because he is very good but she told me she had already looked up the best dentist with the highest rating on Justdial.com and she already had an appointment set up. That was the day I began to realize how dentistry had become commoditized to a large extent.

India has about 309 dental colleges and about 26,000 new dentists graduate every year.¹ According to the registry of Dental Council of India, there were about 2.7 lakh dentist in India in 2018.² The number has only grown will continue to show the same growth trend over the next few years. These are very worrying statistics. This incontrollable growth trend has made commoditization of the dental field even more effortless, and virtually no one is talking about this. Everyone is trying to find their own niche in this new commoditized dental world but no one is taking the time to analyze why it has happened and what are some of the good and bad results it has reaped. So now let us talk about it in detail.

Merriam Webster defines commodity as “a good or service whose wide availability typically leads to smaller profit margins and diminishes the importance of factors (such as brand name) other than price” i.e. a mass produced unspecialized product and commoditization as “to render (a good or service)

widely available and interchangeable with one provided by another company”.³ Thus the commoditization of dentistry means that the provision of oral healthcare by one dentist has become interchangeable and equal with another dentist's work. This is not necessarily bad, that is to say like every other problem this also requires a balance to achieve the best solution.

The idea behind commoditization is that there should be as little a difference as possible between the qualities of commodity from one producer to the next, for example 1 ton of steel remains the same no matter who produced it. In the same way, if dentistry is treated like a business, then the healthcare given by all clinics should be the same. This idea is propelled forward the most by large insurance companies, healthcare conglomerates, corporate entities and even the most recent innovations in the health department. The most rapidly commoditized fields are primary healthcare and radiology. Primary healthcare aims a providing healthcare services to a large population so tools like infection surveillance software, diagnostic AIs, population health tools, EHRs (electronic health records) etc. promote commoditization of the field. While in radiology, commoditization has rapidly taken home because the services provided by radiologist are largely machine-based and they can easily be rendered superfluous by rapid advancement in technology. That

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is not to say that this rapid commoditization has not helped the growth of these fields or that the services provided have declined in their quality. In the case of primary healthcare, the many tools have helped the healthcare providers give a faster and more accurate diagnosis, that is provided at almost the same cost everywhere; this has streamlined the whole process a lot so now provision of primary healthcare has become more convenient and affordable. In the case of radiology, commoditization has spurred a number of technological advancements that have made radiologic assessment more widespread, which has made giving an accurate diagnosis even more unexacting.⁴

The large number of dentists in India has led to mushrooming of dental clinics with each clinic trying to outperform the other. This has turned the profession of oral healthcare provision into a business, so now providing a healthcare service has become equal to purchase of a commodity; and the dental field has become commoditized. This has given rise to a retail environment and permeated the feeling of consumerism in the field. This is a double edged sword as consumerism is an intersection of price and quality and often times, if a balance is not maintained, one is sacrificed for the other which can have grave consequences. Similarly, the commoditization of dentistry is also a double edged sword and both parts have to be discussed before ruling our judgment in either possible direction.

So now let us talk about three points in favor of commoditization. First of all, I would like to remind everyone that commoditization makes the commodity uniform, universally accepted, standardized, well defined and interchangeable so now all the commodities or healthcare services, as you were, have become the same and people need not worry about the practical quality of the healthcare they are getting. Everyone dentist tries to one-up the other so they can attract more patients than the other, so now they have to maintain the good quality of care because even one mistake can cost them their reputation they could be left behind. Also this has given rise to price transparency, since the dentist cannot lower his quality of service, he has to lower his price to match or supersede his competitor. This has also made the process of healthcare faster and more streamlined

since now time is money and a dentist cannot afford to waste his time waiting or making the patient wait. So patients are now provided with fast, cheap, first rate oral healthcare service.

But if everything is good, then why even talk about it? Because while things may appear to be great, they aren't. As you may have noticed the above paragraph makes it sound like running a dental clinic is now like running a race where the dentist has no time to waste because if he slows down, then he may lose the race. This ideology is ineluctable, especially when the competition between dentists is encouraged by online rating sites like justdial.com, practo.com etc. Things are not this rose colored when looking through the perspective of a dentist. Dentists are making less money on average, after adjusting for inflation, than they were making 10 years ago. So they have to work at multiple places to earn a respectable salary and setting up their own clinic is tantamount to a nightmare as it is a hefty investment that takes a long time to yield beneficiary results. This whole process has affected the morality of the physician in a number of ways which has led them to lose motivation in the nobility of their profession.

Not only the dentist, but patients are also affected by this way they don't comprehend easily. For example now that the dentist works for money, he tends to give preference to rich and affluent patients over poor and welfare patients. The quality of practical treatment may be the same but the approach towards them is different. While the rich patients are received well and given early appointments while poor patients are referred to government hospitals or teaching universities where the care is cheaper and the dentist can free up more of their time for rich patients.⁵ Also the dentist has stopped caring about the patient as a whole, only focusing on their mouth now. So anything from the patient's mouth that does not pertain to their treatment is now a waste of time. So now the dentist and their patient have no degree of familiarity between them and either of them becomes replaceable and interchangeable. This has become common place even though it is strictly against the Code of Ethics formulated by Indian Dental Association, wherein it is stated that "(4.1.2) Treat the welfare of the patients as paramount to all other considerations and shall

conserve it to the utmost of his ability; (4.1.3) Be courteous, sympathetic, friendly and helpful to, and always ready to respond to, the call of his patients, and that under all conditions his behavior towards his patients and the public shall be polite and dignified".⁶

To conclude my analysis, I would like to say that commoditization has given the profession of dentistry a paradox of choice. While on one hand, there are those who are benefitted by it and on the other hand there are those who are harmed by it. A balance needs to be achieved as soon as possible. Someone once equated the profession of car mechanic to dentistry to car mechanic, saying that they both involve fixing a machine so why is one paid more than the other to which the physician replied because he fixes the car while it is still running.

Dentistry used to be an idyllic profession with independent high quality dentists that had great familiarity with their patients. The patients used to stick to one dentist that they would take their kids and grandkids to and even recommend to other people. Now dentists are in a race to outdo each other while the patients shop by price. It is now impossible to go back to the idyllic situation of the past but we all need to work hard towards achieving the new normal.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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