

COVID-19 and Impact in dental academia

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COVID-19 pandemic has affected whole world in different ways financially, socially and psychologically and dental academics is no exception like any other education. The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) effectively has shut down approximately 2000 active dentists and dental specialists in Nepal. The virus that causes COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, is profusely present in nasopharyngeal and salivary secretions of patients infected with it¹ and is believed to be spread primarily through respiratory droplets, as well as aerosols and fomites.² The widespread transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in many communities, the potential for infected individuals who are pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic to transmit the virus to others, and the nature of dental interventions with close proximity of the dentist to the patient's oral cavity, all contribute to the high risk for dental personnel teams becoming exposed and transmitting the virus to other patients or staff. Some dental procedures may lead to aerosol generation, further increasing risk of transmission to dentists or future patients through direct inhalation or contact with contaminated surfaces.

The lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic forced dental institutes to hold their clinical training and to shift to distant learning methods. Institutes were forced to take different measures to ensure the continuity of

education, considering the safety of students, faculties and patients. One of the biggest challenges has been to stop direct patient care, which is a key component of the dental curriculum. One cannot deny that didactic and clinical skills are two different outcomes of education. No virtual sessions can duplicate the close experience with patients.³

In all situations, it remains the responsibility of dental institute to certify the competency of dental students, without deviating from original curriculum. Nepal Dental association and Nepal Medical Council have developed interim guidelines for dental practice but not regarding dental education.

During the past few months, e-Learning had become a sole and only option to ensure the continuity of higher education. Fortunately, e-Learning has proven to be a successful adjunct and has definitely impacted the environment in which medical students learn.⁴ Some disciplines seem to function well this way; however, this cannot be applied in its pure form for all subspecialties. For instance, in disciplines where patients' care is a primary goal, students need to attend clinics and provide patient treatment while acquiring their skill and competencies. Although new technologies with simulation and virtual reality techniques are gaining more interest, still the direct in person experience is one that cannot be simply replaced. Though theory classes could be conducted online, the development of practical skill is highly affected. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the need to adapt teaching methodologies, due to the impossibility of having classes with physical presence. Therefore, online teaching and learning has played an important role in higher education since the last few months. Even after the highly awaited vaccine becomes freely available, the online platform of education and the new normal in dentistry will be part of our education and regular clinical practice.

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