Reclassifying The Faculty Status of Demonstrators in Pakistani Dental Colleges and some Suggestions on Building The Future Faculty

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The planning to build the faculty of any future dental institution should ideally be dictated by certain factors. These include presence of potential learners (students), prevalence of dental diseases in the catchment area of the institution and the need of manpower to address the anticipated oral health care problems in a professional manner. All of this should be governed by and done under the umbrella of regulatory and statutory bodies of the country.

All over the world, dentistry is primarily a profession that is run in the offices (clinic setups) as solo, group or associated practices. However, scenario is different in the academic practice i.e. in dental colleges, hospitals and university dental centers. Unlike western world, where a dentist in a full time academic career is not indulged in practice and primarily focuses on teaching, research and scholarly activities; the dental academia in Pakistan is quite different. Here, most of the dental faculty carry out private practice in the evening and thus should better be considered as morning-time teachers and evening-time practitioners. Although, the benefits of private practice are undeniable; monetary gains, prosperity, fame and professional satisfaction to name a few but as dentistry is a physically demanding profession, a busy teacher-practitioner can seldom do justice with the academic workload.

Upon scrutiny of the workload distribution of any Pakistani dental faculty, it would be evident that 60-70% of professional time is spent in the patient care at private practice. It can be speculated that this unjust time is one of the reasons behind low academic productivity and not contributing to the research in the institution. The prime time of a faculty is spent in lectures, assessments and administrative responsibilities of the college/department, thus, there is hardly any time and energy left with the poor faculty to contribute in the educational innovation.

How can this stagnation in the educational productivity among dental faculty be managed? A simple solution to this problem is to encourage institutional faculty practice with no provision of private practice by dental faculty outside institution of employment. Only institutional practice should be allowed with faculty members receiving an adequate financial compensation for the patient care services they provide in the colleges. This will not only improve the quality of care offered to the less-affording patients at the academic centers but will also offer a lot of learning opportunities for the students as they will observe the faculty members actually performing the procedures. Student would gain first-hand experience without spending money on the clinical courses outside. The learning that takes place with observation is undisputable.

Another problem is dealing with the demonstrators/lecturers working in the dental colleges. Although, this group carries the academic title but in fact have no formal residency training or advanced specialty credentials that should be an essential requirement for an academic appointment. In a nut shell, demonstrators are not eligible for a faculty status. Counting demonstrators as faculty members creates several problems:

a- They constitute the biggest teaching group in any dental college. Thus, they artificially inflate the count of teachers and partially satisfy the PMDC (Pakistan Medical & Dental Council) criterion on the number of teachers per department. But being untrained, their clinical experience is limited and hence the quality of teaching is compromised. In other words, the quantity over quality rule prevails in the college academia.

b- Mostly, there is no criterion for their selection and appointment. Any graduate can become a demonstrator on the next day of completing house job. And above all there is no career ladder for them. A demonstrator can remain demonstrator for an entire career spanning over 30 or more years.

A simple and straight forward solution to the dead-end academic path faced by the demonstrators is to reclassify the faculty status of demonstrators. The present demonstrators should be ideally be classified as "Teaching Assistants". This change should be brought in at the level of PMDC. The argument is not about demonstrators not doing their job; instead the point here pertains more to the misclassification of employment and expecting too much from cadre of people who are not trained for the job. The academic appointments should start from the position of Assistant Professor. This does not mean that all demonstrators that are presently employed in the colleges should be expelled out of the institutions. Infact, the demonstrator position...
should be reclassified as teaching assistants so that their job description matches their credentials. Moreover, demonstrators should be retained as employees of the dental colleges but not in the faculty ranks. The faculty grade must be reserved for dentists with formal advanced education in the form of FCPS residency training or University based MDS/PhD training. In this manner, the educationally frozen group of demonstrators should be replaced with formally trained and educationally qualified people.

In summary, only those individuals should become faculty who have the right credentials and are on the academic ladder to potentially reach the professorial position provided they meet the requirements for the same.

REFERENCES