

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG DENTAL
PROFESSIONALS**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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ABSTRACT

The Implications of Substance Abuse Among Dental Professionals

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According to literature, the rate of drug abuse and addiction is higher in dental providers than in the general population. This is because dental providers have greater access to prescription drugs as well as occupational stresses that put these individuals at risk. The stresses of education, work, patient's needs, finances, and economic burdens can lead to self-neglect and heightened chances of drug use among dental professionals. Hence, these individuals are at a greater risk of developing a substance abuse problem. Dental professionals that abuse substances while working violate many legal, ethical, and clinical standards amended by the ADA and the Texas State Board. Under the Hippocratic Oath, it is the healthcare provider's duty to treat patients to the best of their ability and not endanger themselves with any substances that could lead to malpractice within the office. Any report of substance abuse within the health community will be referred to the state board of dentistry or other authorities where they may suspend or

revoke their license. There are many strategies that may aid dental health professionals in their recovery from substance abuse. Many times, states offer a diversion program that allows dental health professionals to recover from their addiction without losing their license. These programs have high recovery rates among dental professionals. Overall, further research should be done on the topic of substance abuse within the professional dental community since this issue could lead to the possibility of patient endangerment if those affected by abuse are not helped.

DEDICATION

To our friends, families, instructors, and peers who supported us throughout the research process.

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INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse and risk factors associated with substance abuse are a common issue in the healthcare field, yet it is something that is not well-discussed due to the taboo that surrounds it. Substance abuse is the medical term which describes a pattern of substance use that causes significant problems or distress. Substance abuse can be the abuse of both illegal substances, such as heroin, cocaine, marijuana, or methamphetamines, or legal substances such as alcohol and prescription medications. ¹ According to the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, the rate of prescription drug abuse and addiction among healthcare professionals is five times higher than that of the general population. ²

The ease of access to drugs in a dental office, along with the stresses associated with working in a stressful and time-consuming field, increases the chances of substance abuse among dental professionals. A study in the United States showed that 10 to 15 percent of healthcare professionals will abuse substances during their lifetime. ³ This is a high rate considering healthcare professionals are the caregivers responsible for the health and well-being of the general population. This puts the public at risk due to malpractice in the dental profession. The public should be able to put its trust in these professionals to be treated with beneficence and nonmaleficence. It is the oral healthcare professionals ethical and legal responsibility to uphold these values to retain the public's trust.

In 2013 a Dentist in Lindenhurst, NY was inebriated and gave local anesthesia to a patient in the wrong part of the mouth. He then proceeded to give more in the correct location, numbing the patient's entire mouth. He also attempted to file a patient's tooth with a drill while intoxicated. ³ These actions were very dangerous to the patient's well-being. Fortunately, a co-

worker noticed the odd behavior and contacted the police immediately. The officers arrived and detained the dentist who was later charged with misdemeanor reckless endangerment. ⁴ This is just one of many examples of how this topic is of relevance today due to the dangers associated with substance abuse in the dental profession. Research on this topic supports the current National Dental Hygiene Research Agenda (“NDHRA”) priority area of occupational health-determination and assessment of risk. ⁵

With the rising rate of substance abuse among healthcare professionals, it is important to identify the legal, ethical, and clinical implications, along with the signs of substance abuse and proper methods of disciplinary action towards those who are caught practicing under the influence, particularly in the dental space. These specific issues will be discussed in this paper.

1. IDENTIFY THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUBSTANCE AMONG ORAL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

The dental/dental hygiene profession can be very mentally and physically demanding. Approximately seventy-five percent of dentists believe that their job ranks higher in stress levels than other professions. ⁶ The stress of dentistry is consuming and often begins early in the profession, generally before the dental license is even granted. The taxing nature of dental school can lead many aspiring dentists to put their own self-care and relationships on hold. This behavior can be detrimental to one's emotional and psychological development. In a 2021 study, sixty-four dental schools were surveyed on the incorporation of substance abuse in the student's curriculum. Of the sixty-four schools surveyed fifty percent responded in full. Of those thirty-two schools, eighty-one percent claimed the primary education method of substance use disorders was through lectures. Lack of space, time and faculty are the top three reported reasons education on substance abuse was hindered. ⁷ Dentists are not immune to substance abuse. It can happen that good dentists become impaired in their practice. Receiving a license does not eliminate or protect a dental provider from the many predisposing stressors of day-to-day life. ⁸

Frequently, dentists learn to put their education, work, and patients' needs above their own. ⁸ After graduation many new dentists are burdened by the substantial debt often accumulated throughout the years of training and education. ⁸ These economic concerns along with the stress of running a business can induce an immense amount of pressure. Many practitioners are required to sit for long hours and provide consistent, high-quality levels of performance. This type of demanding environment can cause strain and can take a physical and emotional toll on the dentist. Increased hours, decreased collegial support, adverse work

scheduling, staff shortages and many other factors can predispose an individual to seek external methods to cope with the difficulties. The dental professional has access and power over controlled substances creating an environment that assists in the evolution of a substance abuse problem. Studies have shown that about 87 percent of healthcare providers prescribe their own medication. Over half of the healthcare providers currently on medication for pain management wrote the prescription for themselves. ² Under federal law, physicians are not prohibited from self-prescribing medications; however, the American Medical Association Code of Medical Ethics, states that compromise in objectivity can arise when physicians treat themselves or family members. The self-prescription of controlled substances should be refrained unless it is an isolated or emergency setting. ⁹

Due to the stressful environment often found in private practices dental professionals are at a greater risk of developing a substance abuse problem. More than 232,000 deaths were reported in the U.S. from overdoses due to prescribed opioids from 1999 to 2018. The number of deaths in 2018 were four times greater than that of 1999. ¹⁰ Isolation from colleagues and the many responsibilities of owning a business can cause heightened levels of stress, especially when dealing with these factors alone. Fields of work specializing in solo practice are at a higher risk of substance abuse. ¹¹

In addition to these factors, a person's genetic predisposition can also lead to an increased risk of substance abuse. Genetic factors can contribute to approximately half of an individual's susceptibility to drug addiction. ⁸ Individuals with a family history of addictive disorders are genetically susceptible and are more likely to struggle with substance abuse that affects their practice. ⁸ Additionally, the significant worldwide spread of SARS-CoV-2 in 2020 brought many new stress related factors into the everyday lives of individuals in the workforce of dentistry.

Mandated lockdowns, suspension of dental procedures, social distancing, and the need for greater precautionary measures can all add to the anxiety of running a dental practice. Though the spread of COVID-19 through dental personnel was relatively low (average of 0.5 percent over a six-month study) ¹², the risk is still there. Health care workers are both physically and mentally being affected by COVID-19 related anxiety, job insecurity, sleep disorders, and depression. ¹ All of this could increase the risk of an individual seeking methods of stress relief such as substance abuse.

Dentistry requires precision and dedication. Being chemically impaired can have serious implications on all parties involved. The substance abusers' health, the patient's well-being and the practice's reputation are all at risk when addiction is present in the dental office. Patients rely on dental personnel to provide high quality care and an environment of trust and professionalism. Violation of either of these causes distrust in the community as well as in patient-practitioner relationships.

2. DESCRIBE THE LEGAL, ETHICAL, AND CLINICAL ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH PRACTICING ORAL HEALTH CARE WHILE UNDER THE INFLUENCE

It is clearly unlawful, unethical, and dangerous to be operating in a chair while under the influence of any illegal or harmful substance. This type of behavior puts the professional, colleagues, and patients in danger. The abuser violates the ethical portion of the ADA Code of Conduct and the laws of the State of Texas. According to the Texas State Board Examiner, the Amended 22 Tex. Admin. Code §108.9 – Dishonorable Conduct states, “The purpose of this section is to identify unprofessional or dishonorable behaviors of a licensee which the Board believes are likely to pose a threat to the public. Actual injury to a patient need not be established for a licensee to be in violation of this section”.¹³ The ADA also states, “Your professional and DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) licenses may be at risk if there is mishandling of controlled substances in your office, or prescription fraud in your name”. To summarize, all dental providers are prohibited by the State of Texas to be working and abusing any form of alcohol, drugs, or substance during practice or outside of office hours. Violations will be reviewed by the Texas State Board Examiner on a case-by-case basis. Penalties can range from paying a fine to suspension from practice. In some cases, the Texas State Board could possibly terminate a practitioner's license, depending on the severity of the case.

As a part of the final step to graduation, all dental students must swear under the Hippocratic Oath. According to UCLA David Geffen, under the Hippocratic Oath, all medical professionals are required to treat all patients to the best of their ability, to maintain the patient's right of privacy, and to continue to pass down education to future generations.¹⁴ Treating

patients under the influence of drugs, alcohol or chemical substances violates the fundamental duties of a healthcare professional. Dysfunction and impaired performance could lead to many catastrophic results. According to ADA Principles of Ethics Code and of Professional Conduct, stated in ADA Principles of Ethics Code & of Professional Conduct under Advisory opinion 2.D. Personal impairment, “It is unethical for a dentist to practice while abusing controlled substances, alcohol or other chemical agents which impair the ability to practice”.¹⁵ Among the Five Fundamental Principles of the ADA code: performing any dental work while under the influence violates the principle of “beneficence”.¹⁵ The goal under the beneficence principle for every clinician is to provide quality service for all patients. Under the beneficence rule, all dental providers must follow the Golden Rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.¹⁵ Working under the influence does not demonstrate intentions for the patient's well-being.

It is crucial to maintain a healthy working environment in dental offices. In the dental profession, all departments work as a team. Whether it is the general dentist, dental hygienist, or dental assistant, the key to a successful treatment depends on the team’s communication. If one member of the team is clearly under the influence, it hinders the quality of performance and creates a toxic working environment. The ADA and the State of Texas require all dental offices to have a drug-free environment. This includes the abuse of drugs among dental workers. The work environment must be drug-free to provide a stress-free working environment for everyone. According to the ADA Dentist Well-being Programs Handbook, “Drug and alcohol abuse affect individual users and their families, but also can affect the workplace. Impairment in the dental office has a particular set of risks and costs to the practice”.⁸ Due to the close proximity and length of tenure among many dental workers, it is common for workers to consider one another as family. Knowing someone who is struggling with substance abuse can create a mental battle

for the person's colleagues. The colleagues who are aware of the issue, may feel uncomfortable confronting the person due to the nature of relationships within the office. There are other psychological factors to consider such as trust issues between the abuser and their colleagues. It is difficult to create a healthy environment with an individual who is unable to perform his or her duties. Therefore, it is everyone's duty to report any illegal actions or suspicious activity. This puts colleagues' licenses at risk because it is also their responsibility under the law of Texas and ADA code of Conduct to inform law enforcement if there is an issue.

Overall, there is no present research in support of illegal drugs, alcohol or chemical use while working. Being under the influence jeopardizes one's license, colleague relationships, the work environment, and most importantly, the wellbeing of their patient. However, many dental professionals are unaware of proper methods of action to take towards another dental professional practicing under the influence.

3. RECOMMEND STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES TO ASSIST ORAL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS IN DEALING WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE

There are many strategies that may aid dental health professionals in taking the proper methods of action towards another dental professional practicing under the influence. Since this may be a very sensitive topic to many, especially regarding personal relationships with coworkers, it may be difficult to decide what course of action to take. The first step one may take is to record and document every unethical situation that is encountered through progress notes, reports, and letters which can include recording any events, conversations, and any other collateral concerns. When an unethical situation is reported to the dental state board, they will do a thorough investigation of not only the impaired professional, but anyone involved as well. That is why it is important to go back and make sure every incident is recorded and that the dental health professional has legally and ethically continued to follow proper protocols regardless of the professional who may be abusing substances. The dental health professional may then use this information to make a request of review to the Texas Dental Association's Peer Review Process. The Peer Review Process is a panel of dentists who serve on committees to help assist patients and dentists through an informal process that resolves problems and disputes through mediation or panel review. These professionals have been leaders of their society due to their clinical skills and judgment within the dental community. Ethical dilemmas such as quality of work and beneficence are very important topics that the Peer Review reviews. However, any dilemmas that involve fraudulent or illegal dental practices are not within the scope of the Peer Review Process. Any issue that is deemed a violation of the state law should be reported to the

constituent society for possible referral to the state board of dentistry or other appropriate authority where they may suspend or revoke the subject professional's license.

Many states, including Texas, also have a diversion program, which is a confidential program for dental health professionals who cannot practice due to impairment with alcohol or drug abuse. This program allows the dental professional to recover without losing their license by providing them with intervention services and treatment. The ADA Dentist Well-Being Handbook states that this is done so that licensed professionals who have been reported for incompetent practice or violations of the practice act can first be evaluated and treated if the impairment in practice has resulted from addictive, psychiatric, or medical disorders. ⁸ However, a licensed professional may not be eligible for a diversion program if their misconduct was due to criminal, fraudulent, or any other illegal activity.

In other instances, concerned colleagues may not want to “tattle” on other dentists. There are programs available by many state boards such as the Texas State Board of Dental Examiners that provide dental well-being and professional recovery programs. The Professional Recovery Network (PRN) of Texas is a peer assistance program that helps health care professionals to recover from their addiction illness in a safe and healthy manner. The PRN is a group of licensed and trained staff that help assist and support professionals who may be struggling with impairment due to alcohol, drug abuse, or mental illness. This program allows healthcare workers to recover confidentially before having disciplinary action taken against them. A colleague may first confront a dentist with the information that something appears to be interfering with their ability to practice safely and then make a referral or recommend the dentist make a self-referral to the PRN. The dentist should be aware that if they do not seek an

assessment and follow recommendations, that colleagues or peer assistance volunteers may be legally and ethically required to report any concerns to the dental state licensing board.

If it is deemed that a dental professional has knowledge of but has not reported a professional under the influence, they are violating Texas state board laws. According to the TDA Code of Ethics, all dental professionals have an ethical obligation to encourage colleagues who are chemically impaired to seek treatment as well as report first-hand knowledge and evidence to the appropriate entity. ⁸

The state board as well as the ADA want dental professionals to thrive in their profession and do good to their patients. A dental professional may not get his or her license taken away but rather suspended under the assumption that they receive help and care for their addiction. The TDA encourages and gives many resources to substance use services that are available for professionals residing in Texas. According to the ADA Dentist Well-Being Handbook, it is the belief and experience of dental professional well-being programs and other professional assistance and advocacy efforts that the majority of cases involving practice impairment as a result of an illness can be successfully treated. ⁸ There are high recovery rates of professionals who have been adequately treated for addiction and are diligent about ongoing treatment and monitoring programs. These individuals may also report seeing big differences in their practice afterwards as they tend to be more empathetic, compassionate, and better able to handle stressful situations.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it is unethical, illegal, and unprofessional for a dental professional to put a patient's health at risk by being under the influence while treating them. This puts themselves and their colleagues at risk of legal consequences which may potentially lead to a terminated license. It goes against the Hippocratic Oath and the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct. It is important for clinicians and educators to be prepared to look for signs of drug abuse in their colleagues to prevent harm to them as well as to patients. Data has shown that the rate of substance abuse in the public only continues to exponentially grow.¹¹ Substance abuse in dental professionals is an issue that will surely follow and only continue to progressively get worse if action is not taken to better prepare and equip professionals for these types of situations. Substance abuse among dental professionals is not covered nearly enough or at all in dental education programs. Dental programs tend to only cover substance abuse in regard to their patients but many times it can be the dental professionals themselves who are practicing impaired. Dental education programs need to integrate identifying, reporting, and treating substance abuse among dental professionals into their curriculums. A dental professional rarely suspects or may overlook signs of substance abuse in a colleague simply because they were not educated on this topic sufficiently. The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) needs to take charge and add substance abuse among dental professionals into their recommended teachings. Dental professionals are trained to look for signs with their patients but not with their colleagues. More awareness needs to be brought to the subject. If this does not improve, more incidents of malpractice by impaired dental professionals will occur. This shift will bring more awareness to the issue of substance abuse in the dental profession as well as

bring more education on the topic to readers. It is crucial that more dental professionals widen their awareness of substance abuse for the safety of patients and professionals alike. Will the predicted increase in the rate of substance abuse in healthcare professionals cause there to be more stories like the one about the New York dentist? Dentistry is a dangerous field in itself and it does not need to have any more risk factors added to it.

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