

# Defensive Dentistry: The Future of Dental Practice?

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Defensive dentistry in plain language means practicing safe dentistry. This kind of dental practice is provided to the patients for the safety and benefit of the dentists and not for the benefit of patients.<sup>1</sup> Dental doctors in large part are forced to do so due to ever-increasing fear of complaint to some “authority”, fear of being investigated, or fear of being sued (litigation).<sup>1,2</sup>

In near future, Nepali dentists are at high risk of facing such consequences because most Nepali dentists are not good at record keeping or taking notes. Additionally, majority neither take informed consent (written) for procedures or photographs nor are aware of providing appropriate information sheet in native language regarding the same.

Most of us became dentists because it was thought to be a respectable profession where we could earn decent money and make people smile using our skill and knowledge.<sup>3</sup> While some of it may still hold true, many dentists currently seem disillusioned. Defensive dentistry recently caught our attention when we came across a newspaper article describing the plight of a British Broadcasting Corporation employee who by no fault of hers became the victim of defensive dental practice and in turn had life devastating consequences.<sup>4</sup> She felt that what she went through was avoidable, if no defensive dentistry had been practised.

Defensive dentistry, like defensive medicine, discriminates in favour of taking minimal or no risks.<sup>2</sup> Many treatments which could often be done by young dental practitioners are being

routinely referred to more experienced clinicians at sometimes detrimental cost to patients.<sup>1,4</sup>

The term may be comparatively new to Nepali dental practice where dentistry is still trying to gain its foothold as a profession. In western world however, where dentistry once flourished, it seems it is on downhill slope due to multiple litigations with dentists being dragged to court over minor issues.<sup>1-3,5</sup> Studies also report numerous inappropriate referrals by dentists to be on safe side.<sup>4-6</sup> Thus, defensive dentistry is becoming a popular choice over past two decades.<sup>7</sup>

In dental schools, we are trained to become competent in all areas of general dentistry.<sup>3</sup> However all students and teachers of undergraduate dental programmes have come to realise that it is truly a vast field with variety of subjects packed into five to five-and-half-year course.<sup>3</sup> The knowledge side of dentistry to some extent is covered in the undergraduate curriculum, the business aspect of general dental practice, the ethical concerns, the legal aspects, and disparities in private, public, and academic sectors are often overlooked or inadequately covered.

Due to chaos of the existing system in both developed as well as developing nations, many recent

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graduates feel vulnerable, stressed, and upset.<sup>3,5</sup> In a country like Nepal where job placement options are meagre, the frustrated young dentists seek placement abroad for greener pastures. However dentists practicing abroad know how cautious and fearful, the practice of dentistry has become due to fear and implications of overzealous complaints.<sup>3</sup> Dentists in countries like United States of America and the United Kingdom (UK) have to work under pressure and constantly worry that they might be taken to court over some triviality.<sup>3</sup> Dentistry as a profession, seems at crossroads and many dentists appear to be suffering from mental health crisis.<sup>3,7</sup>

A pilot study conducted among 38 dentists of Netherlands (1997) reported that despite no evidence of fear for malpractice claims and lawsuits, back then also “defensive behaviour in dental practice existed.<sup>8</sup> Another study conducted in UK (2017), had only 96 (14%) dentists participating out of 660 invited. The findings concluded that increasingly “no risk” or “only low risk” treatments will be undertaken by dental professionals that can lead to deleterious consequences on dental health of the population.<sup>7</sup> In light of this kind of defensive dental practice, clinicians are routinely denying certain treatment or investigations that have partial success or diagnostic rate.<sup>3</sup>

To summarise, in a nation like Nepal, oral health seems ignored both at government level as well

as individual level. Patients more often seek for extraction of their tooth rather than saving by restoration or endodontic treatment followed by crown placement. Hence, the idea of “defensive dentistry” practice may seem far-fetched in current Nepali dental scenario. However, with the internet revolution, public has become more aware about their rights and hopefully their oral health too. Since “forewarned is forearmed”, it is not too long that Nepali dentists too will have to face similar hassle. Hence, in addition to knowledge of subject, it is recommended that future dental doctors be trained in patient handling, communication skill, counselling skill, complaint handling, stress management strategies, dental (business) practice management, and financial planning.

Thus, besides doing ethical dental work at all times, it is high time Nepali dentists started writing accurate notes and maintaining good record keeping of their works, preferably with the help of some professional software where information can be easily shared among different consulting dentists and specialists. Other vital qualities that Nepali dentists need to have, to keep “defensive dentistry” at bay are: good time management, counselling, and communication skills.



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