

# Forensic Odontology: Trends in India



Many Indian dentists, from both private clinical practice and university-based teaching and research roles, have contributed to forensic odontology casework in India since the early 1970s. Specialization in forensic odontology has been possible in several countries around the world, but while the Dental Council of India has included this as a subject in the B.D.S. Course Regulations (2007), a postgraduate course is yet to be started. It was first proposed at the DCI's GBM in Goa in December 2009, and in his inaugural address to the participants, the demand was endorsed by the then Govt. of Goa's Chief Secretary Shri Sanjay Kumar Srivastava.

Quoting verbatim from the approved minutes of the meeting of the 124<sup>th</sup> session of the Dental Council of India held on 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> May, 2012 at Golden Jubilee Hall, Panjab University, Chandigarh under the item MISC PART-I, it is stated that, "The Dental Council of India considered email dated 30.04.2012 from Dr. Ajit D. Dinkar, Goa thereby enclosing the proposed Curriculum Guidelines of MDS Degree Course in Forensic Dentistry for the approval of the Dental Council of India. The necessary draft provision of Forensic Dentistry be incorporated in the Revised BDS and MDS Course Regulations, 2007 and draft amendment be prepared accordingly. Thereafter, the following recommendations of Forensic Dentistry be forwarded to the Government of India along with the draft amendment in BDS and MDS Course Regulations. The Government of India be requested to approve the draft proposal for starting of Forensic Dentistry (MDS) u/s 20 of the Dentists Act, 1948."

Thereafter, the Dental Council of India held a 'Workshop on the Postgraduate MDS Degree Curriculum (2007) Revision' on 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> October 2012 at Govt. Dental College and Hospital, Mumbai, followed by a meeting of the 'Dental Council of India's Sub Committee for National Workshop on Curriculum Reforms in MDS Course Regulations 2007' on 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> May 2013 held at the DCI's Head Office in New Delhi. It was a genuine expectation that the approved M.D.S. Course in Forensic Odontology would start in India for the first time, at least during the Academic Year 2014-15. However, as on so many other occasions, the Dental Council of India has failed to act expeditiously and judiciously ignoring the rising demand for forensic dental

services in the present Indian social conditions and dental education sector in particular. One hopes it is only a case of a prolonged pregnancy and would eventually result in a delivery that fully meets the aspirations of not only the dental student community who would benefit with a new specialty and ensuing increase in the postgraduate seats, but also satisfy in full measure the demands of the legal fraternity and law enforcing agencies for competent accredited services in this specialty.

Today, only a very small number of dentists in India have got a formal training in forensic odontology, of variable duration and content, mainly from the U.K., or Australia. With no Indian postgraduate degree training programs existing, there is only a non-funded research hampered by lack of adequate infrastructure. The advantages of a postgraduate degree program lie in its positive effect on basic research in the field. Postgraduate degree programs offer more research depth and capacity, have ties to other fields, have high expectations for quality, supply postgraduate student personnel to question and check past work and challenge conventional wisdom, and inspire more mentoring, which has two-way benefits.

As no nationally recognized, mandated standards exist for forensic dental postgraduate degree programs in India, consistent quality cannot be achieved. While the primary objective of all degree programs is similar, the capabilities of graduates from the respective institutions are not uniform. Laboratories, Legal Firms and Law Enforcing Agencies, Armed Forces will be forced to evaluate each graduate student individually to determine his/her suitability for a given position.

Unevenness in the quality and duration of foreign programs will cause problems for students and future employers. Students completing these lesser programs expect to find employment in crime labs, legal firms, or dental colleges but are surprised to learn that crime laboratories or legal firms are not impressed by the curriculum. Even if a student graduates in India with a dental degree with forensic odontology as a subject, he or she often lacks education in issues that are critical to the functioning of crime laboratories, law firms and legal agencies, especially in quality assurance

and control, ethics, and expert testimony. Measures should be taken to improve feedback from the crime laboratories, legal firms, and the judiciary and armed forces to ensure that the curriculum is not only comprehensive from an academic standpoint but also meets their practical requirements.

Luckily, the Indian Association of Forensic Odontology – the premiere national professional or academic society has since the last over twelve years supported the discipline through its Annual National Conferences, National Workshops, and sponsored Lectures. The Founder President Late Dr. J. G. Kannappan played a stellar role and was followed by equally enthusiastic and competent office bearers. Gradual improvements have been made over the past twelve years, and an exciting renewed interest exists in younger dental practitioners as evidenced by the rising number of dental graduates and postgraduates from various specialties participating in the IAFO's activities. Continuing to foster and develop this discipline within the overall forensic-science framework in India is possible and should be encouraged.

Reliable forensic evidence, reported accurately and presented with clarity and honesty in court and with limitations clearly expressed, can be essential for the correct resolution of many criminal and civil cases. To correct some of the existing deficiencies, the starting place must be better graduate and postgraduate degree programs, as well as increased opportunities for continuing education. Legitimizing practices in the forensic science disciplines must be based on established scientific knowledge, principles, and practices, which are best learned through formal education and training and the proper conduct of research.

Demand for more and better-skilled forensic dental practitioners is rising at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the need for trained forensic dental manpower in India should be quantified, while at the micro level, the skills required of forensic dental personnel to be hired/employed by a crime laboratory, a legal firm, or the law enforcing agencies like the police and judiciary as also the needs of the Armed Forces and para-military organizations should be defined.

One manifestation of the need for forensic dental personnel is the backlog of requests for forensic services at crime laboratories, bank ATM outlets, hospitals that report theft of new-born males, airline, train and road accidents as also natural disasters like earthquakes and floods resulting in mass fatalities. Despite a Forensic Odontologist trained in latest digital person identification processes having much to contribute, one is still to read of any State/Central Disaster Management Team incorporating a Forensic Odontologist! Or for that matter, no University/State/Central Sports Agency seeking age estimation of the sportspersons is known to contractually hire/regularly employ a Forensic Odontologist. Having an accurate picture of the demand as well as the capacity of employers to absorb new forensic dental professionals is important for colleges and universities that are earnest about educating and training the future workforce. Additional information on such factors as retirement and attrition rates, on trends in establishing accredited independent private crime laboratories could assist educational providers in obtaining a more accurate picture of future employment prospects for their students.

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