

# Comparison of patients perception of dental care offered by male or female dentist: Cross-sectional hospital based study

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To assess patient perception toward male or female dentists, whether gender stereotyping of dentists offering dental treatment played a role. The study then went further to investigate if patients reacted differently toward the dentist's gender when placed in certain situations. **Materials and Methods:** This study was conducted in Academy Dental Teaching Hospital, the total number of participants was 384 adult over 18 years male and female their number was equally divided. Data were collected by the use of a self-administered questionnaire. Questions were closed ended in which the patient had one of three options: male dentist, female dentist or no difference. The participants with experience of being treated by both a male and female dentist were only included. Data were analyzed using Chi-square test with a level of significance set at  $P < 0.05$ . **Results:** Overall there is no specific dentist gender preference among the studied population. With the decrease in patient's age an association was found concerning patients perception, the range of 18–39 years showed the highest percentage of preference toward a specific gender. More than half (62.2%) of patients stated that if given the choice, they would not choose a dentist gender of different sex. **Conclusion:** Gender was not an issue for patients when it came down to the treatment process, and it was however established that patients perceived certain characteristics represented specific dentist genders. Patients felt more relaxed when they were being treated by a female dentist, but felt male dentists showed more confidence during the treatment process.

## Key words

Dentist gender, gender stereotyping, patient perception

## INTRODUCTION

Over the years speculation has been made about dentists and dental treatment. Going to the dentist office is usually associated with pain, although the accusation is false, it brings up the question on whether other dental falsehoods are taken seriously; does the gender of the dentist affect the patient's perception of dental care in general? The comparison of male versus females is not a new concept. Over the years women and men have been said to be equals, is this statement true or is gender stereotyping still influences everyday decisions? Would a patient go as far as to change their dentist only based

on their gender? Gender stereotyping, which is ethically immoral occurs every day but is it in our right to deny a patient their preference of dentist gender without being just as immoral? A patient's psychological state of mind influences all of their medical decisions; this includes gender preferences, which in turn could influence their treatment outcome.

Knowledge and insight of patient's preferences are essential for improving the quality of dental care. The patient-dentist relationship is an important factor and needs to be taken seriously. The quality of interpersonal care is important to patients.<sup>[1]</sup> Dentistry like most medical fields that involve communication between the doctor and patients is a very intimate process. It might be expected that there could be a stronger sex preference in situations when the intimacy, or perhaps the seriousness, of the presenting condition increases.<sup>[2]</sup> This raises the question of whether patients solely rely on the dentist's skills and achievements or is it more personal, is communication essential when treating a patient?

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In the past 30 years, the number of women enrolling in for a career in dentistry has grown steadily.<sup>[3]</sup> If gender stereotyping is in fact present and the number of female dentists outnumbers the male dentists, this could influence the dental field either way. Some may assume that some dental procedures require a certain amount of man-power, this kind of mindset would lead dental patients to believe that female dentists lack in certain fields of dentistry. Discrimination goes both ways, male dentists could be said to be less esthetically aware than females when concerning conservative dentistry.

Religion can also play a role in gender preference. It's believed that some Muslim women, in particular, do not consult with their physician due their gender therefore going on without proper medical treatment.<sup>[4]</sup> This affects all medical treatment, including dental. In certain countries, this is said to be a legitimate reason for refusing medical care based on religious belief. This sends the message that patients who refuse dental treatment solely based on the fact of their dentists gender to be labeled as sexist even though it is the patients belief.

This study focused on answering three main questions: Is there a gender preference in dental care, does the patient's gender affect their choice of dentist and lastly, does patient's age have an association toward the preference of the dentist's gender.

The main objective is to identify whether patients gender or age plays a role in gender stereotyping, and the comparison of male and female dentists in relation to overall treatment. The specific objectives are whether the age or gender of the patient affects how they react to dental care according to the dentist gender as well as how they perform during the treatment process.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional-hospital based study in the Academy Dental Teaching Hospital (specialized dental hospital, belonged to the University of Medical Science and Technology, Faculty of Dentistry, located in El-Emtidad area in Khartoum locality-Khartoum state). The study duration was from November 2012 to April 2013. The Study population consisted of male and female adult patients over 18 years attended outpatient clinics for follow-up or new dental complaint. Patients came for the first dental visit in their life, disables or elderly uncooperative were excluded.

The appropriate sample size was calculated with confidence level 95% using the following:

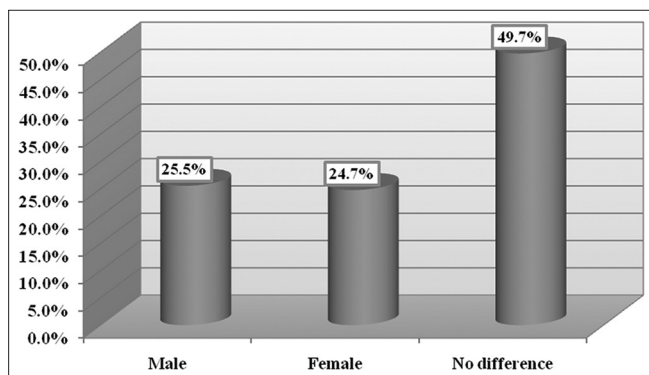
Formula:  $n = z^2 \times p \times q/d$ , assuming  $P$  is equal 50%, the sample size was found to be 384, this number was divided equally for both sex as (50% female and 50% male patients). Non-probability purposeful sampling

technique was use to select eligible participants during the period of the study.

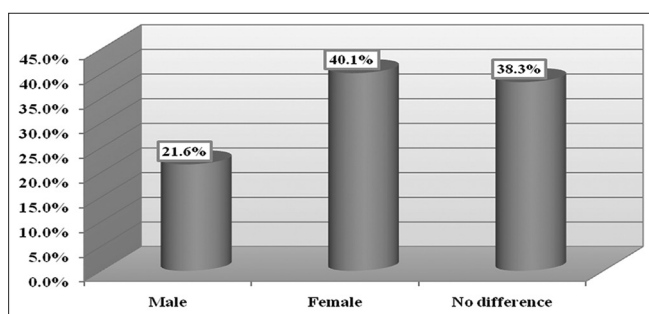
A self-administered questionnaire including questions about demographic data. Other questions centered on specific criteria's that focused on patient's feelings toward the dentist. Questions were closed-ended in which the patients choose one of three answers: Male dentist, female dentist or no difference and age of dentist if affecting their perception toward treatment, the questionnaire then went into more detail by asking if they preferred a specific dentist gender to treat them. They were also asked by whom they felt more comfortable with; during the treatment period. The questionnaire was filled by selected patients before starting their dental treatment at outpatient clinic, the purposes of the study explained to eligible patients and were requested to participate voluntary with a written informed consent. The questionnaire was pretested in the Arabic language by 25 randomly selected patients to ensure comprehensibility, reliability, relevant and accuracy in the Sudan context. Cronbach's alpha test showed the reliability coefficient of 0.85 and found satisfactory for conducting the study. These 25 questionnaires were not included in the final study. The study was approved by Ethical Committee in the University of Medical Science and Technology. Data were analyzed by SPSS statistical software package (SPSS for Windows, Rel. 20.0. 2011. Chicago: SPSS Inc.). Descriptive statistic of the results was displayed in the form of tables and figures. Comparison between variables was done using Chi-square test with a level of significance set as  $P \leq 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

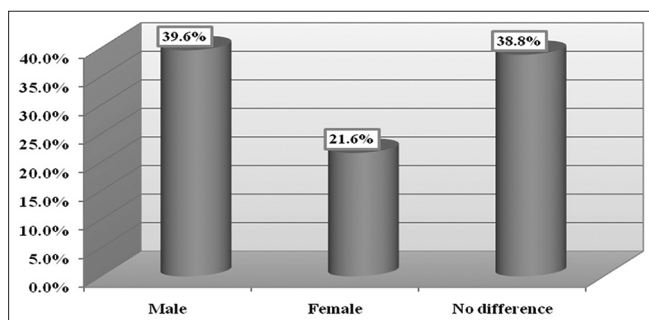
From descriptive statistics of the results, the data was displayed in the form of tables and figures. Gender distribution of the study was an equal number of male and females while the age of the participants showed a higher percentage being between the ages on 18–38 years. There was no specific preference towards dentist's gender the majority of patients selected no difference [Figure 1]. When it came to patients opinions of which dentist asked more personal questions? There is the statistical significant difference between male and female dentist where it goes toward female asking more personal questions, but still 39.6% of patients selected no difference [Table 1]. Figure 2 revealed that patients felt more relaxed when being treated by a female dentist. The result stated that a higher number of patients felt that neither dentist gender expected them to withstand pain without complaint. The majority of patients perceived female dentists as both; explaining their diagnosis and treatment in more detail, and having more patience during procedures. It was displayed in Figure 3 that male dentists were perceived as having more confidence while working. It was believed that female dentists took longer time during the history process. Table 2 showed patients perception according to their age, toward which dentist gender (male or female) expecting them to withstand pain without complaint with



**Figure 1:** Percentage of patient's preference to be treated by male dentist, female dentist or no gender difference. Patients were asked which dentist (male or female) they prefer to treat them. No specific preference towards dentist's gender the majority of patients selected no difference



**Figure 2:** Percentage of patients feeling relaxed when given an option to be treated by male dentist, female dentist or no gender difference. Patients felt more relaxed when being treated by a female dentist



**Figure 3:** Percentage of patient Perception of which dentist gender shows more confidence while working. Male dentists were perceived as having more confidence while working. It was believed that female dentists took longer time during the history process

a  $P=0.00$ . Concerning explanation of patient's diagnosis and treatment there was no difference according to gender, while there was a high significance difference when patients asked which gender they felt had more commitment to their profession, males were said to be more committed than their female colleagues.

## DISCUSSION

In addition to patients perception of dental care offered by a male or female dentist, the study went further to

**Table 1: Perception of patients according their gender of which dentist (male or female) asking more personal questions?**

Patients expecting dentist (male or female) asking more personal questions	Dentist (male or female) expected by patients asking more personal questions (%)			P
	Male dentist	Female dentist	No different	
Patient gender				
Male	57 (14.80)	67 (17.40)	68 (17.70)	0.002
Female	28 (7.30)	80 (20.80)	84 (21.90)	
Total	85 (22.10)	147 (38.30)	152 (39.60)	

**Table 2: Perception according to the age of the patients toward which dentist gender (male or female) expecting them to withstand pain without complaint**

Patient's expectation according to their age: which dentist (male or female) expected them to withstand pain without complaint? (%)	Patient's expectation according to their age:			P	
	18-39 years	40-61 years	>62 years		Total
Dentist gender					
Male	114 (29.7)	15 (3.9)	4 (1.0)	133 (34.6)	0.000
Female	69 (18)	19 (4.9)	3 (0.9)	91 (23.7)	
No difference	97 (25.3)	24 (14.1)	9 (2.3)	160 (41.7)	

investigate if patients reacted differently towards the dentist's gender when placed in certain situations. It's important to understand how patients perceive their doctors; it influences the entire treatment process. Similar to result done by May *et al.*, 2005,<sup>[5]</sup> the results obtained revealed that with increasing age, gender preference towards the dentist reduced. With increasing age patients want a dentist who has more experience, while younger patients may take the treatment process more personally and want a dentist, which whom they can relate to. When it came down to which dentist patients felt asked, more personal questions female dentists got more responds than their male colleagues. Although both male and female dentist ask the same medical questions females in general extract more personal information, not all of which is significant to the patients treatment, this in turn enables the dentist to have a close relationship with their patient making the situation less frightening. Females appear to be less dominant verbally during the visit than male doctors.<sup>[6]</sup> A previous study found that patients liked their doctors to be good at relating to them on a personal level and to take a personal interest in them.<sup>[7]</sup> The results showed that the majority of patients felt more relaxed when they were being treated by a female dentist. This could be due to the fact that as stated above female dentists take the time to get to know their patients before starting treatment; the same result was obtained in Maryland in 2008,<sup>[8]</sup> the result could be due to the fact that female dentists due in fact branch out from the standard line of

questioning that's conducted during history taking. The reason female dentists take longer during history could be due to the fact that patients themselves reveal more information. In Saudi Arabia women stated that a women doctor could be asked more questions concerning their treatment, thus taking up more time.<sup>[9]</sup> It is also stated according to study conducted by Roter and Hall; that visits with female physicians on average are 10% longer than with male physicians.<sup>[6]</sup>

In contrast, although patients felt more relaxed with female dentists they perceived male dentists as having more confidence while working. Males have a take charge attitude, which may be misinterpreted as having more confidence than females. It was shown that males gave the impression of being in charge.<sup>[8]</sup> Female dentists might have a tendency to pause more during the treatment phase, and this could also be mistaken for being less confident. Anxious penitents prefer a male dentist compared to patients who are not anxious.<sup>[10]</sup> Although the results showed male dentists as having more confidence, it was female dentists that were said to explain the patient's diagnosis and treatment plan in detail than males. This could be explained as female's dentist want their patients to feel more relaxed and attempt to make their patients feel less anxious. It was proven that patients liked their doctor to take the time to explain their situation fully and that this expectation was more likely to be met by a female doctor.<sup>[7]</sup>

In terms of the dentist that expected their patients to withstand pain without complaint, results showed that patients saw no difference between the two dentist genders. This shows that although compassion is usually linked with women here gender doesn't play a significant role. This result was not shared with a previous study that stated that male dentists would expect patients to endure pain without complaint.<sup>[8]</sup> Although it was found that with a decrease in patient age male dentists were perceived as having a higher expectation of their patients than females. The majority of the patients stated that in terms of commitment to their professions both male and female dentists were equally committed. Patients are less judgmental about women and their careers; women are being seen more than just home-makers. Although a previous study showed that male dentists showed more devotion to their jobs than females.<sup>[8]</sup> even though, male and female dentist are perceived in different way. When dealing with the treatment aspect of dentistry although male and female dentists have different technique styles the end result remained the same.<sup>[11]</sup> This could be due to the fact that people feel more comfortable about talking about their personal problems with a member of

their own sex, this could be due to religious reasons or due to embarrassment, for example, bad breath. Roter *et al.*, 2001, showed that both male and female patients overwhelmingly chose male doctors.<sup>[12]</sup> The difference between these two results could be due to the area in which the study was conducted.

## CONCLUSION

There is no specific preference for dentist's gender when it comes to selecting a dentist. The study also highlighted what patients thought about each dentist in regards to their gender and how they behaved in certain situations. Patient age and gender of the dentist are statistically significant related. More than half of patients (62.2%) stated that if given the chance, they would not choose a dentist gender of different sex.

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