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Usage of complementary and alternative medicine: A survey among Indian dental professionals

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ABSTRACT

Objective: CAM therapies are used along with standard medical care. Though there are various medical evidences to prove the effectiveness of CAM therapies in managing medical problems, the evidence for the dental application are still lacking in India. This could be attributed to the non-availability or the insufficient knowledge regarding the use of CAM in dentistry. Hence it is necessary to obtain the baseline knowledge regarding the use of CAM therapies among dentists.

Method: Cross sectional questionnaire based survey.

Results: There were mixed attitudes towards CAM approaches in dental practices. Lack of clinical knowledge and exposure during their graduation and inadequate scientific evidence can be attributed to their hesitation in practicing the CAM.

Conclusion: Though interested, dental practitioners were still cautious in putting CAM into clinical practice. Only very few dentist used CAM therapies and they limited their use to topical application for oral problems.

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1. Introduction

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is defined by the U.S. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) as a group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine [1].

CAM procedures are frequently used when a patient with a chronic health problem hasn't responded well to conventional treatment. The list of CAM procedures includes Homeopathy, Naturopathy, Ayurveda, Acupuncture, Hypnosis, Biofeedback, Aromatherapy, Chiropractic etc.

Herbal medicines have been used for thousands of years in developing countries and more than 80% of the population relies on their use for health care needs [2]. These alternative therapies are quickly gaining importance as they are perceived to be free of side

effects, considering their natural origin [3].

Researches shows 2860 hospitals in India uses TM (traditional medicine) [4]. Though CAM therapies are widely used for medical problems, their use in dental practice still remains less. Researchers should be encouraged to conduct controlled studies to prove the effectiveness and safety of natural dental products. Those studies will provide dentists with sufficient clinical evidence before prescribing promoted natural products for their patients.

Complementary and alternative medicine procedures are under scientific investigation to determine effectiveness. Dental patients request CAM therapy in an attempt to save money and to prevent invasive procedures. CAM procedures may eventually become standard practice after scientific verification of efficacy. At this juncture dental practitioners are compelled to extend their practice from conventional practice to include CAM into their practice. Little is known about the knowledge, perception and practices of dental practitioners regarding CAM. Hence, a study has been planned with an aim to assess the awareness, perception and practices of the dental practitioners in southern India regarding the use of alternative and complementary medicine in clinical practice.

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2. Material and methods

The study was initiated after obtaining clearance from the Institutional Ethical Committee. It is a cross sectional study design where 520 dental practitioners in southern states of India were selected by convenience sampling. An inclusion criterion for the study is any dentist with Bachelor's or Master's degree practicing in south India and willing to participate in the study.

A 17-item questionnaire covering the important aspects of use of alternative and complementary medicine in dentistry was administered to the study participants. The test-retest reliability of the questions was tested by a pilot study by administering it to 15 study participants and repeating those 2 weeks later. The data was analyzed and Cronbach' alpha co-efficient was calculated to test the reliability.

Sufficient time was given to the practitioners for completion of the forms. The questionnaire was collected and the survey was kept anonymous. The data obtained from the completed forms was entered in an excel sheet and subjected to statistical analysis. The frequency and percentage was calculated using SPSS 17 version.

3. Observations and results

Out of 520 dental practitioners, 264 were male and 256 were female. The research included 247 practitioners with BDS degree and 273 with MDS degree.

3.1. Knowledge about CAM

When the knowledge about CAM was assessed among the dental practitioners, it was found that 86.7% were aware and 13.3% were unaware about CAM. And majority of them (94.2%) were aware about use of CAM in dentistry and only 5.8% were unaware about natural products used in dentistry (Table 1). Majority of the practitioners (73.3%) reported that media (internet, newspaper etc) were their major source of knowledge regarding alternative medicine.

3.2. Attitude about CAM

42.5% of the dental practitioners agreed that clinical care should integrate the best conventional and CAM practices, and 3.3% disagreed to this view. Most of the practitioners (50%) agreed that CAM includes areas and methods from which conventional medicine could benefit.

Practitioners (52.5%) were neutral in their attitude regarding CAM's promise for treatment of symptoms, conditions and/or diseases, which shows their uncertainty about the alternative medicine use in dentistry. Also regarding the true impact of CAM on treatment of symptoms, majority had a neutral attitude.

Practitioners believed that health professionals should be able to advise their patients about commonly used CAM methods, and majority disagreed that CAM is a threat to public health. 45.8% of the practitioners had an attitude that knowledge about CAM is important to them as a patient (Table 2).

Table 1

Awareness regarding complementary and alternative medicine among dental practitioners.

	Yes	No
Awareness of CAM (traditional medicine)?	86.7%	13.3%
Awareness that natural products can be used in dentistry?	94.2%	5.8%

3.3. Practices of CAM

70% of the practitioners have not advised alternative medicine in their dental practice. Among those who practiced, 28.3% reported that their prescription was effective and 8.3% reported complications due to the use of alternative medicine in dentistry. Nearly half the study participants do discuss about the use of CAM with other dental professionals and majority (77.5%) were concerned about the safety of using CAM in their dental practice.

The survey also reports that 85% of the dental professionals are interested and willing to know more about the use of CAM in dental practice, which signifies the initiation of continuing education programs/courses which is required among the dental professionals regarding their use of alternative medicine in their day to day practice.

An open ended questionnaire was asked to them regarding the modality of alternative medicine they practiced in dentistry. Only 17.5% had answered the question, though 30% were practicing alternative medicine in dental field (Table 3).

4. Discussion

Products made from botanicals that are used to maintain or improve health may be called herbal products or herbal medicines [5]. These herbal medicines and therapies fall under complementary and alternative medicine and are being used worldwide as they are perceived to be free from side effects.

In the recent years tremendous interest has grown in complementary and alternative medicine and its relevance to medical and dental health. Most of the medical schools started offering education in complementary medicine.

The present study highlights the knowledge, attitude and practices of dental practitioners regarding complementary and alternative medicines. Most of the study participants (86.7%) were aware about CAM; it was mainly through media, internet and newspaper. Very few gained knowledge through education programs and lectures which implies that CAM are to be included in dental education programs and every dental professional should be trained in practicing those therapies. Knowledge gained through family members was less in the present study, whereas few studies among university students in US and northern India reported that family to be a major source of information and recommendation concerning herbal product use [3,6].

The study participants had a positive attitude towards CAM and its integration in practice, more than half (68.1%) either agreed or strongly agreed that combination of best CAM and conventional method. Also 59.2% agreed that conventional treatment could benefit from CAM use. This may be due to strongly belief that anything in natural form will have no side effect.

Though 59% of the subjects agreed that conventional medicine could benefit from CAM, 52.5% were neutral to its potential benefit for treatment of symptoms or diseases. This clearly shows the practitioners' uncertainty to the CAM use. This ambivalent stance was further proved by nearly half of the subjects who gave neutral response to-'CAM has no true impact' (48.3% Neutral).

Majority of the practitioners did not advice alternative medicine in their practice. This could be due to the insufficient knowledge and evidence in prescribing and treating patients through CAM. The few people who used CAM approaches were prescribing various herbal products like alovera, clove, neem and only one subject had used acupuncture as a treatment to chronic pain.

Majority (77.5%) were concerned about the safety of use of CAM in dental practice, which could be due to the lack of documentation regarding safety of CAM in dental practice. As majority of the practitioners were willing to know more about the use of CAM, it

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