

A Study on Perception of Oral Medicine as a Career Speciality Among Dental Students

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Abstract

Background: Oral Medicine (OM) is an interdisciplinary specialty essential for diagnosing and managing medically related oral conditions; however, students' perception of OM as a career remains unclear.

Objective: To assess dental students' perception of Oral Medicine as a career specialty and compare findings with international evidence.

Methods: A descriptive, questionnaire-based survey was conducted among 101 dental students in Chennai using a pre-validated, structured Google Forms questionnaire. Ethical approval was obtained. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).

Results: Although most students recognized OM's role in diagnosing systemic-related oral diseases (64.9%), significant gaps were observed in awareness of its interdisciplinary scope, clinical relevance, and career pathways. Perception of OM's future was strongly linked to improved recognition, exposure, and training.

Conclusion: Students value OM but exhibit limited understanding of its full scope. Strengthening curriculum integration, mentorship, and clinical exposure is crucial for improving interest and informed career choices.

Keywords: Oral Medicine; Dental Students; Career Perception; Specialty Choice; Awareness and Attitude

Introduction

Oral Medicine (OM) is a specialized branch of dentistry dedicated to the oral healthcare of medically complex patients and the diagnosis and management of medically related disorders affecting the oral and maxillofacial region. As a discipline that bridges medicine and dentistry, OM plays a crucial role in identifying, evaluating, and treating a wide spectrum of conditions, including oral mucosal lesions, premalignant disorders, salivary gland diseases, temporomandibular joint dysfunction, orofacial neuropathic and pain conditions, infections in both immunocompetent and immunocompromised individuals, and complications associated with cancer therapies such as osteonecrosis and immune-related adverse effects. Career pathways for oral medicine specialists are diverse, ranging from private practice

and hospital-based dentistry to roles in cancer care centers, medical and dental college faculty positions, academic leadership, residency program administration, editorial responsibilities, and clinical or translational research.

Referrals to OM typically originate from general dentists, physicians, or other specialists when patients present with persistent oral or maxillofacial concerns, and the scope of practice varies depending on whether the clinician works in an academic, hospital, or private setting. In recent years, the specialty has gained academic momentum owing to its multidisciplinary approach, expanding clinical responsibilities, and increasing involvement in research and medical-dental collaborative care. Despite these developments, many dental students continue to favor procedurally intensive specialties such as oral and maxillofacial surgery, orthodontics, and restorative fields due to perceived clinical engagement and financial prospects. Nonetheless, interest in OM has been gradually rising, driven by its diagnostic emphasis, patient-centered approach, and evolving integration with technology and interdisciplinary healthcare. International studies describe OM as a unique, competent specialty supported by multifaceted training programs, with career appeal influenced by lifestyle, income expectations, professional reputation, and mentorship. In this context, understanding dental students' awareness, perceptions, and attitudes toward Oral Medicine is crucial for guiding curriculum development, improving specialty exposure, and fostering informed career decisions. Therefore, the present study aims to assess perception of oral medicine as a career speciality among dental students.

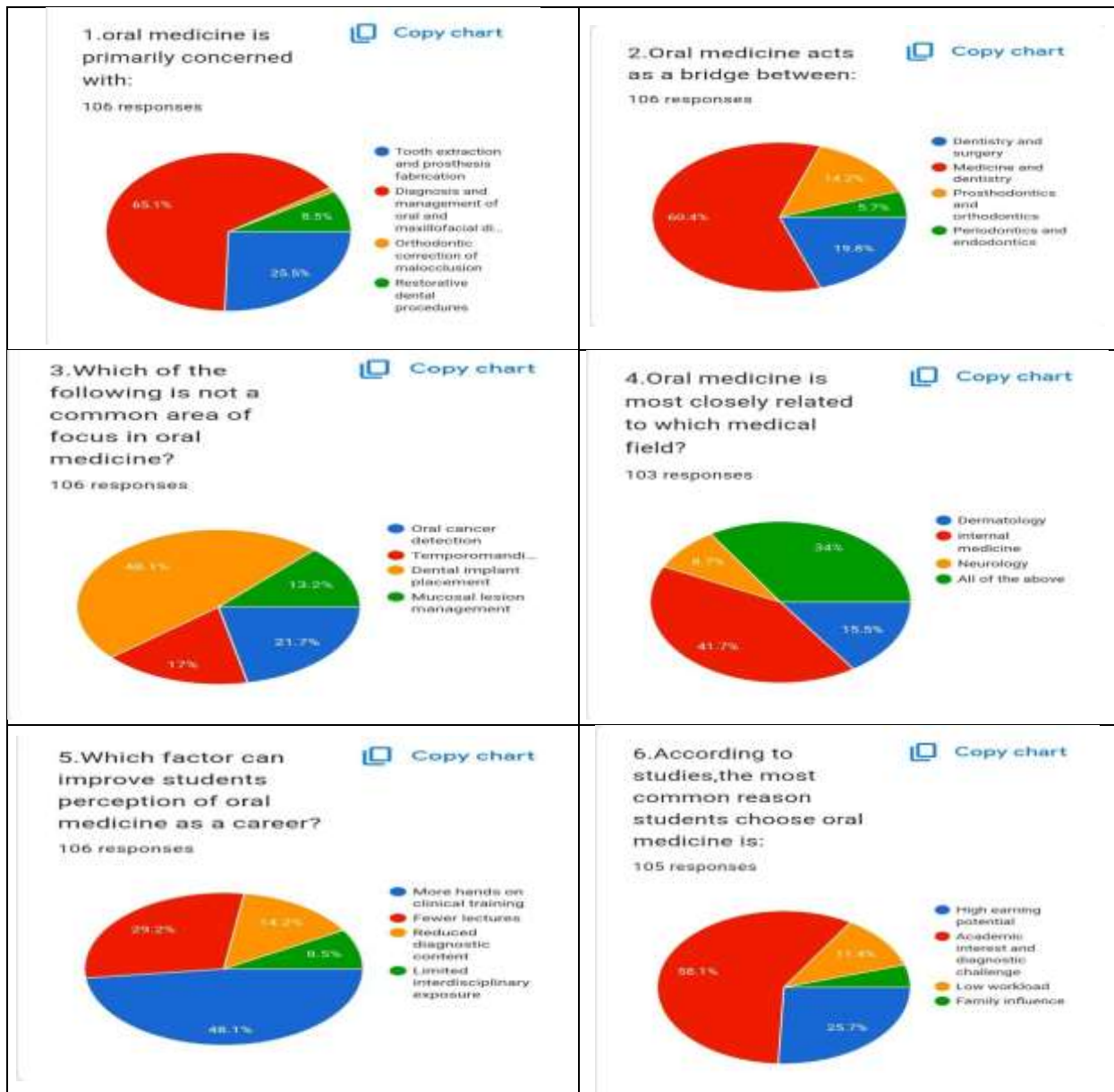
Materials and Methods

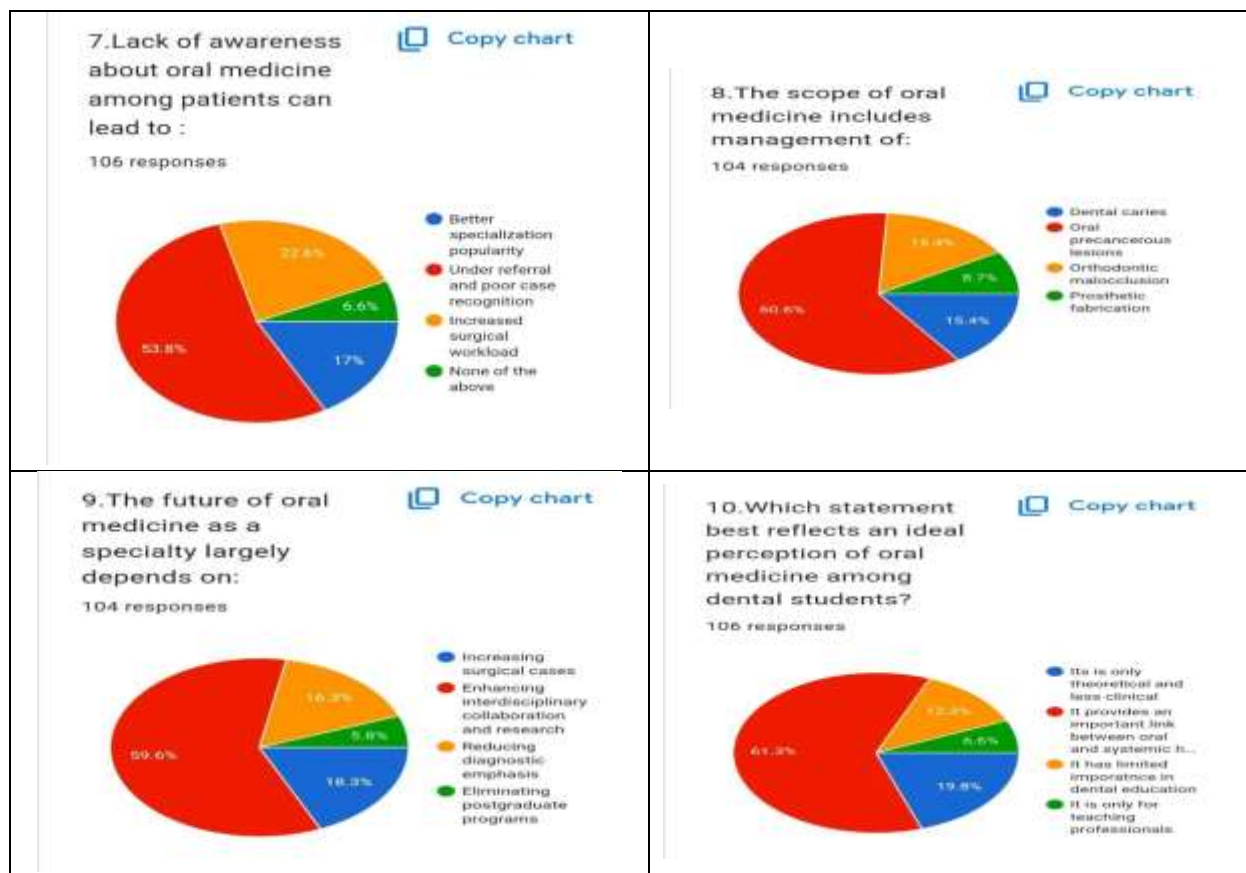
A descriptive, questionnaire-based survey was conducted to evaluate the perception of Oral Medicine as a career specialty among dental students. The study population consisted of 101 participants from a private dental college in Chennai. A pre-validated, structured questionnaire comprising multiple-choice items was developed to ensure comprehensive and reliable data collection, and the survey was disseminated electronically via Google Forms to promote easy and wide participation. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, and the study was carried out under the guidance of the Department of Oral Medicine and Radiology. Participants were briefed about the study objectives, assured of confidentiality, and informed that their participation was voluntary in accordance with ethical standards. All responses were compiled using Microsoft Excel, and descriptive statistics primarily frequencies and percentages were employed for analysis. Findings were presented in tabular and graphical formats to enhance clarity and interpretation.

Results

The survey results reveal that while a substantial proportion of students demonstrated good understanding of core oral medicine concepts, notable knowledge gaps persist across several domains. Most respondents (64.9%) correctly associated oral medicine with diagnosing and managing oral conditions of systemic relevance, though 35.1% held misconceptions, indicating the need for stronger foundational teaching. Nearly half (46.8%) recognized oral medicine as an interface between dentistry and medicine, reflecting partial awareness of its interdisciplinary nature, while others showed uncertainty. Understanding of the specialty's scope was moderate, with 41.4% correctly identifying the non-focus area, and 43.2% acknowledging its overlap with dermatology, showing uneven comprehension that could benefit from curriculum reinforcement and clinical examples. Students largely agreed (46%) that increased clinical exposure improves perception of oral medicine, underscoring the role of hands-on experience in shaping

attitudes. Motivation for choosing oral medicine was primarily driven by interest in diagnosis and systemic conditions (50.5%), though some cited limited alternatives, emphasizing the importance of career guidance. The majority (62.2%) also recognized that poor awareness contributes to delayed diagnosis and treatment, reflecting insight into the specialty’s public health impact. A strong proportion (70.3%) correctly identified mucosal lesions and systemic manifestations as central to the field, although continued emphasis on emerging areas like orofacial pain may further enhance knowledge breadth. More than half (52.3%) believed the specialty’s future hinges on increased recognition and awareness, and 64.9% perceived oral medicine as underappreciated yet essential, highlighting the need for stronger institutional visibility, improved curriculum integration, and targeted sensitization efforts.





Discussion

The findings of our study, which demonstrated significant variability in students' knowledge, awareness, and perceptions of oral medicine, align closely with global literature that highlights similar challenges and attitudinal patterns among dental undergraduates. Marie Naito et al. emphasized that a strong willingness to learn oral medicine is independently associated with high job satisfaction, suggesting that positive engagement with the specialty enhances professional fulfillment. This complements our results, where students who demonstrated better awareness and interest also expressed more favorable perceptions of the specialty.⁷ In contrast, Mazen A. Almasri et al. reported that students overwhelmingly prioritized general dentistry (76%) and ranked orthodontics and OMFS next (60%), while forensic dentistry and oral radiology were markedly undervalued; this mirrors our observation that oral medicine is perceived as essential but still under-recognized, reinforcing the trend of students gravitating toward mainstream, high-visibility specialties.⁸ Similarly, Kanmodi et al. found OMS to be the most preferred specialty, highlighting the skewed distribution of interest within dental disciplines and underscoring the need consistent with our conclusion to actively promote awareness and strengthen exposure to less preferred fields such as oral medicine to ensure balanced workforce development.⁹

Zhang Y et al. further reported that even among health-related students, awareness of oral health issues and dental specialties remains low, often leading to misconceptions that general dentists can manage all oral diseases; our findings resonate strongly with this pattern, as many respondents in our study demonstrated only partial clarity regarding the true scope of oral medicine, emphasizing the critical need for educational reforms and targeted awareness programs.¹⁰ Sahni S et al. described oral medicine as an emerging global specialty due to its expanding interdisciplinary nature, preventive approach, and research advancements, recommending enhanced visibility, mentorship, and accessible information on residency

opportunities these suggestions align directly with our observation that students believe the specialty's future depends on increased recognition, clinical exposure, and curriculum integration.¹¹

Supporting this trend, the Nigerian study reporting dental radiology as the least popular specialty (1.1%) highlights how diagnostic specialties are routinely undervalued, similar to the moderate knowledge levels regarding the diagnostic and systemic functions of oral medicine identified in our study.¹² Literature further confirms that students' interest in medical–dental interface specialties is growing (Kumar et al), consistent with our finding that many respondents selected oral medicine due to an interest in diagnosis and systemic conditions.¹³ However, factors such as career prospects, mentorship, and perceived difficulty of alternative fields also highlighted by Kumar et al. and Iqbal et al. continue to shape specialty preferences, echoing our observation of diverse motivations among students.^{13,14} Additionally, prior studies (Kamal et al., 2021; Schmidt-Westhausen et al) stress the urgent need for expanded oral medicine training in dental curricula, especially given the increasing complexity of oral diseases in aging populations an argument strongly supported by our results, which demonstrate statistically significant gaps in knowledge and highlight the necessity of strengthening academic, clinical, and interdisciplinary components of oral medicine education.^{15,16}

Collectively, these comparisons reinforce that our study reflects global trends: oral medicine is recognized as important but remains undervalued, under-taught, and insufficiently integrated into dental training, necessitating comprehensive strategies to enhance awareness, exposure, mentorship, and career visibility to elevate the specialty's profile among future dental professionals.¹⁷⁻²⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study demonstrates that while students recognize the importance of oral medicine, their overall awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the specialty remain limited reflecting global trends reported across previous studies. Consistently significant gaps in knowledge, motivation, and perception highlight the ongoing undervaluation of diagnostic and interdisciplinary specialties. Comparisons with international literature reinforce that insufficient exposure, lack of mentorship, and limited curricular emphasis continue to influence specialty choices. Strengthening educational strategies, enhancing clinical engagement, and increasing visibility of oral medicine as a rewarding and evolving field are essential to improving student interest, correcting misconceptions, and ensuring a more balanced and well-prepared dental workforce.

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