RESEARCH PAPER

Assessment of Knowledge, Awareness, and Attitude Toward Radiotherapy Among Dental Students in a Dental Teaching Institution: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT
Background: Radiotherapy is an important treatment for head and neck cancers but may cause several oral complications, including mucositis, xerostomia, dental caries, salivary dysfunction, and osteoradionecrosis. Dental students should have adequate knowledge to provide appropriate oral care for patients receiving radiotherapy.
Aim: To assess the knowledge, awareness, and attitude of undergraduate dental students and interns regarding radiotherapy and its associated oral complications.
Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional questionnaire-based study was conducted among undergraduate dental students and interns at Tagore Dental College & Hospital, Chennai, from June to August 2026. A pretested, self-administered questionnaire was used to assess knowledge, awareness, attitude, sources of information, and perceptions regarding curriculum adequacy. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Chi-square test, with $p<0.05$ considered statistically significant.
Results: A total of 462 participants were included. Gender was not significantly associated with knowledge ($p=0.077$), nor were confidence level ($p=0.740$) or source of information ($p=0.083$). Significant associations were observed between perceived curriculum adequacy and knowledge ($p=0.014$), and between the perceived need for additional training and knowledge ($p=0.001$).
Conclusion: Most participants demonstrated good knowledge regarding radiotherapy and its oral complications. Adequate curricular coverage and additional training may help strengthen students' knowledge and clinical preparedness for managing patients undergoing radiotherapy.
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INTRODUCTION :

Radiotherapy is an important form of treatment for patients with head and neck cancers(1). While it is useful in the control of cancerous conditions, there are a number of adverse side effects associated with radiation therapy in the mouth. Some of the side effects that can occur include mucositis, xerostomia, dental caries, salivary dysfunction, and osteoradionecrosis(2). These can have an adverse effect on the oral health of patients under radiotherapy.

Dental practitioners play an important part in preventing, identifying and managing the complications of radiotherapy in the mouth(3). Pre-radiotherapy assessment and adequate preventive care are necessary for these patients. Knowledge of the complications of radiation therapy helps dental practitioners to provide proper patient education and intervention measures(4).

Previous studies have indicated inadequacies in knowledge and awareness regarding radiotherapy and its complications among dental students(5). While students might have a general idea about the application of radiotherapy in the treatment of cancerous diseases, their knowledge on certain conditions such as xerostomia, mucositis, osteoradionecrosis, and preventive oral care can be inadequate. Other studies have suggested that increased clinical exposure can be linked with higher levels of awareness on oncology related oral healthcare(6).

Evaluating the knowledge, awareness, and attitudes of dental students regarding radiotherapy becomes necessary to ascertain the knowledge deficits prevailing within them(7). This will be useful for

enhancing the undergraduate education of dental students and preparing them better to handle patients who are under radiotherapy treatment. In addition, these results can serve as a basis for designing educational interventions for dental undergraduates. The current study has been conducted with the aim to evaluate the knowledge, awareness, and attitude of undergraduate dental students towards radiotherapy(8). Awareness of oral complications related to radiotherapy and sources of information among dental students have also been studied, and the relation between academic year and their knowledge and awareness has also been determined.

MATERIALS AND METHODS :

Study Design:

A cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey was conducted to assess the knowledge, awareness, and attitude toward radiotherapy and its associated oral health complications among dental students. The study was designed to evaluate the level of understanding of radiotherapy among undergraduate dental students and interns and to identify potential gaps in their academic and clinical exposure to radiation oncology-related oral healthcare.

Study Setting and Study Period:

The study was conducted at Tagore Dental College & Hospital, Chennai. The study was carried out over a period of three months, from June 2026 to August 2026. Data were collected from eligible undergraduate dental students and interns during the study period. The questionnaire was administered both on-campus and electronically through Google Forms.

Study Population:

The study population comprised undergraduate dental students and interns enrolled at Tagore Dental College & Hospital during the study period. The sampling frame consisted of undergraduate students and interns available at the institution during the period of data collection.

Eligibility Criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they:

1. Were undergraduate dental students or interns enrolled at Tagore Dental College & Hospital.
2. Were willing to participate in the study.
3. Provided informed consent before participation.

Exclusion Criteria:

Students who were unwilling to participate in the study were excluded.

Sampling Method and Sample Size:

A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit eligible participants who were available and willing to participate during the study period. The sampling frame included undergraduate dental students and interns enrolled at Tagore Dental College & Hospital.

The study protocol specifies that the sample size was based on the total population of undergraduate students and interns; however, the exact calculated sample size and the formula or assumptions used for its calculation were not specified in the protocol. These details should be reported in the final manuscript based on the actual sample-size calculation performed.

Study Instrument:

Data were collected using a pretested, self-administered questionnaire in English. The questionnaire was designed to assess participants' knowledge, awareness, and attitude toward radiotherapy and its associated oral complications.

The questionnaire consisted of the following broad domains:

- Demographic characteristics: age, gender, academic year, and clinical exposure.
- Knowledge: basic concepts of radiotherapy, indications for radiotherapy, tissues affected by radiotherapy, and associated oral complications.
- Awareness and attitude: awareness of preventive oral care, confidence in managing patients receiving radiotherapy, and the appropriate timing of dental interventions.
- Sources of information: lectures, clinical postings, journals, internet-based resources, and perceptions regarding the adequacy of radiotherapy-related content in the dental curriculum.

Data Collection Procedure:

Following informed consent, the questionnaire was distributed to eligible participants. Data collection was performed through both on-campus administration and an online Google Forms questionnaire. Participants completed the questionnaire independently. The questionnaire was pretested before administration to ensure its suitability for assessing knowledge, awareness, and attitude toward radiotherapy and its oral health implications.

Study Variables:

The primary outcome variables were the participants' levels of knowledge and awareness regarding radiotherapy and its associated oral health complications.

The demographic and academic variables included age, gender, academic year, and clinical exposure. Additional variables included sources of information regarding radiotherapy and perceptions regarding the adequacy of radiotherapy-related education within the dental curriculum.

The academic year of the participants was considered an important explanatory variable for assessing differences in knowledge and awareness. The study specifically aimed to determine whether academic year was associated with the level of knowledge and awareness regarding radiotherapy.

Assessment of Knowledge, Awareness, and Attitude
Knowledge was assessed using questionnaire items addressing fundamental aspects of radiotherapy, its indications, tissues affected by radiation, and common oral complications. Awareness and attitude were assessed using questions related to preventive oral care, confidence in dental management, and the timing of dental intervention in patients undergoing radiotherapy. Sources of information and perceptions of curriculum adequacy were also recorded.
The protocol does not specify the exact number of questions, scoring criteria, cut-off values for categorizing knowledge or awareness levels, or the method used to establish questionnaire validity and reliability. These details should be incorporated into the manuscript if they were determined during the study.
Bias:
To minimize potential information bias, a pretested self-administered questionnaire was used. Participants completed the questionnaire independently, thereby reducing the influence of interviewer prompting during responses. The same questionnaire domains were used for participants completing the survey through the on-campus and online modes.
Because convenience sampling was used, the possibility of selection bias cannot be completely excluded. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.
Ethical Considerations:
Informed written consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained by anonymizing responses and avoiding the collection of personal identifiers. Ethical approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee was to be obtained before commencement of the study.
Statistical Analysis:
The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics included frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and mean and standard deviation for continuous variables. These methods were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of participants and their knowledge and awareness regarding radiotherapy.
The Chi-square test was used to assess the association between academic year and the level of knowledge and awareness. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.
The statistical analysis also aimed to identify differences in knowledge and awareness according to demographic and academic characteristics, including gender and clinical exposure.
Handling of Missing Data
The protocol does not specify a predefined method for handling missing or incomplete questionnaire responses. Therefore, the final manuscript should state the actual procedure followed for incomplete responses, such as exclusion of incomplete questionnaires or appropriate handling of missing individual variables.
Study Outcome:
The primary outcome was the assessment of knowledge and awareness regarding radiotherapy and its associated oral health complications among dental students.
Secondary outcomes included identification of differences in knowledge and awareness according to academic year, gender, and clinical exposure; identification of the major sources of radiotherapy-related information; and identification of gaps in dental education related to radiotherapy and oral healthcare.
RESULTS :
TABLE 1: Association Between Gender and Knowledge Category

Association Between Gender and Knowledge Category						
Gender	Poor n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Good n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 value	p value
Male	7 (5.5)	34 (26.8)	86 (67.7)	127 (27.5)	5.135	0.077
Female	12 (3.6)	62 (18.5)	261 (77.9)	335 (72.5)		

P value <0.05 shows statistical significance
Chi square test
Association between gender and knowledge category was determined through the Chi-square test. Even though there were a higher percentage of female subjects who had good knowledge (77.9%) than male subjects (67.7%), the differences were not statistically significant. Based on the Chi-square analysis, there was no significant association between gender and knowledge category ($\chi^2 = 5.135$, df = 2, p = 0.077).
TABLE :2 Association Between Confidence Level and Knowledge Category Among Participants

Association Between Confidence Level and Knowledge Category Among Participants						
Confidence Level	Poor n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Good n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 va	p va

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Confident	8 (3.0)	54 (20.5)	202 (76.5)	264 (57.1)	1.976	0.74
Somewhat Confident	9 (5.6)	34 (21.0)	119 (73.5)	162 (35.1)		
Not Confident	2 (5.6)	8 (22.2)	26 (72.2)	36 (7.8)		

P value <0.05 shows statistical significance
Chi square test

Confidence and knowledge did not have any statistically significant association among the participants (χ^2 = 1.976, df = 4, p = 0.740). There was no difference in the levels of knowledge among participants who were confident, somewhat confident, or not confident. Participants with good knowledge were found to be maximum among participants who were confident (76.5%), somewhat confident (73.5%), and not confident (72.2%).

TABLE 3 : SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Source of Knowledge	Poor n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Good n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 value	p value
Classroom Lectures	11 (3.2)	68 (19.5)	270 (77.4)	349 (75.5)	11.179	0.083
Clinical Postings	2 (3.6)	13 (23.2)	41 (73.2)	56 (12.1)		
Journals/Articles	3 (15.8)	5 (26.3)	11 (57.9)	19 (4.1)		
Internet Resources	3 (7.9)	10 (26.3)	25 (65.8)	38 (8.2)		

P value <0.05 shows statistical significance
Chi square test

The results of the Chi-square test revealed no statistically significant relationship between knowledge sources and knowledge types (χ^2=11.179, df=6, p=.083). Even though individuals who used classroom lectures as their major source of knowledge had greater percentages of good knowledge (77.4%) than those using clinical postings (73.2%), internet (65.8%), and journals/articles (57.9%) as knowledge sources, the differences were not statistically significant.

TABLE 4: Association Between Curriculum Adequacy and Knowledge Category Among Participants

Association Between Curriculum Adequacy and Knowledge Category Among Participants						
Received Sufficient Information in Curriculum	Poor n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Good n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 value	p value
Yes	13 (3.8)	65 (19.0)	265 (77.3)	343 (74.2)	12.576	0.014
No	4 (6.3)	23 (35.9)	37 (57.8)	64 (13.9)		
Not Sure	2 (3.6)	8 (14.5)	45 (81.8)	55 (11.9)		

P value <0.05 shows statistical significance
Chi square test

The chi-square result revealed a statistically significant relationship between perceived curriculum sufficiency and knowledge category (χ^2 = 12.576, df = 4, p = 0.014). Respondents who indicated that they received adequate information in the curriculum exhibited a greater percentage of good knowledge (77.3%) compared to respondents who indicated inadequate information in the curriculum (57.8%)

TABLE 5: Association Between Need for Additional Training and Knowledge Category Among Participants

Association Between Need for Additional Training and Knowledge Category Among Participants

Need Additional Training	Poor n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Good n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 value	p value
Yes	12 (3.1)	75 (19.1)	306 (77.9)	393 (85.1)	13.475	0.001
No	7 (10.1)	21 (30.4)	41 (59.4)	69 (14.9)		

P value <0.05 shows statistical significance
Chi square test

According to Chi-square analysis, there is a statistical relationship between the need for more training and knowledge category ($\chi^2 = 13.475$, df = 2, p = 0.001). Respondents who felt that they required more training were more likely to have good knowledge (77.9%) than those who did not require more training (59.4%).

DISCUSSION :

The current cross-sectional study investigated the knowledge, awareness, and attitude of undergraduate dental students and interns toward radiotherapy and the oral complications associated with it. On average, many participants had good knowledge. Gender did not show any significant relation to the knowledge category ($\chi^2 = 5.135$, p = 0.077), even though there was a little bit of a difference in favor of the females, with regards to good knowledge. In addition, confidence level did not show a significant relationship to knowledge ($\chi^2 = 1.976$, p = 0.740), with good knowledge being 76.5% among the confident, 73.5% for the somewhat confident, and 72.2% for the non-confident. Classroom lecture was the most common source of information, with good knowledge being 77.4% for those who got their information from it, followed by clinical posting (73.2%), internet (65.8%), and journals/articles (57.9%). Nevertheless, the source of information did not show any significant relationship to the knowledge category ($\chi^2 = 11.179$, p = 0.083).

Statistically significant association was established between adequacy of the curriculum and knowledge category ($\chi^2 = 12.576$, p = 0.014). Students who felt that the curriculum was adequate had higher level of good knowledge (77.3%), as opposed to those who considered the curriculum inadequate (57.8%). This may illustrate the potential significance of an adequate coverage of the curriculum on radiotherapy and associated oral complications, given that dentists play a vital role in evaluation, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of such complications prior to, during, and after cancer treatment. Moreover, a significant association was found between the need for additional training and knowledge category ($\chi^2 = 13.475$, p = 0.001). It is noteworthy that the percentage of good knowledge was greater among participants who needed additional training (77.9%), compared to those who did not (59.4%). This implies that having good theoretical knowledge does not always mean there is no need for extra training, since managing such complications clinically also requires practical experience.

The results highlight the need for improving the curricula of undergraduate dental education in radiotherapy and the oral complications arising from this mode of treatment. This is achievable through proper lecture sessions, case discussions, demonstration and adequate clinical exposure. The lack of correlation between the levels of confidence and knowledge shows that the two elements have to be treated separately. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the study, including the use of convenience sample, institution-based nature of the study, a short study period of three months and cross-sectional design that precludes any causal inference about the results. It is also noteworthy that answers obtained from the questionnaire may be affected by personal feelings and perception of the level of confidence and adequacy of the curriculum. Nonetheless, the study offers good information regarding the knowledge of undergraduates on radiotherapy.

There are many strengths associated with the current study. The first strength is that the study involved a relatively large sample size of 462 undergraduate dental students and interns, which created an adequate base to measure the level of knowledge regarding radiotherapy and associated oral complications among them. Another strength of this study is that undergraduate dental students as well as interns were involved in the study, so participants could be assessed who had different levels of academic and clinical exposure. In addition, a pretested self-administered questionnaire was utilized to collect the data, which ensured consistency and reduced the effect of the interviewer on the participants. Furthermore, there were different academic and educational aspects related to knowledge measured in the study, such as gender, confidence level, information source, curriculum adequacy, and need for further training.

Most respondents in the current study demonstrated adequate knowledge of radiotherapy and its oral complications. Similar findings have been reported among dental students, with studies showing that students generally possess basic knowledge of oral complications associated with cancer therapy, although important gaps remain in clinical management and preventive care [9,10]. Studies conducted among dental students in different countries have also demonstrated varying levels of knowledge regarding radiotherapy-related oral complications and oncology dental care [11,12].

The significant association between perceived curriculum adequacy and knowledge in the current study (p=0.014) is supported by educational studies showing that structured theoretical education can improve dental students' knowledge of oral complications of cancer therapy. Erguven et al. reported significantly improved knowledge following theoretical education, with the ONCOllab-supported group achieving significantly higher post-test scores (p=0.001) [13]. Other studies have similarly recommended additional courses, workshops, and practical training to address gaps in students' knowledge of oral care for patients undergoing cancer treatment [14].

On the other hand, Alali et al. found that only 24.2% of 506 senior dental students and interns had good knowledge about oral complications associated with cancer treatment [15]. Moreover, other studies from different countries also revealed that there was poor knowledge about oral care, radiotherapy-related complications, osteoradionecrosis, and management of oncology patients among dental students [16]. These results are different from the relatively high percentage of participants having good knowledge in the current study.

Whereas no statistically significant association was found between gender and knowledge (p=0.077) in the current study, Alali et al. found a significant association between study level and knowledge where dental interns had more knowledge compared to senior dental students (29.7% vs. 21.6%, p<0.05) [15]. However, Alpöz et al. found that there was no statistically significant effect of gender on students' knowledge about oral complications associated with cancer treatment [9].

CONCLUSION :

In the current study, we have studied the knowledge, awareness, and attitude of undergraduate dental students and interns about radiotherapy and associated oral complications of radiotherapy. Results obtained in the study revealed that there was a considerable percentage of participants having good knowledge about radiotherapy and related oral health issues.

None of the factors such as gender, confidence level, and source of information was significantly associated with the knowledge category. However, the factor such as adequacy of radiotherapy-related information in dental curriculum was significantly associated with knowledge. Participants reporting good information in the dental curriculum had a higher percentage of good knowledge category. Another factor which was significantly associated with knowledge category was the perceived need for additional training. This suggests that students realized the need for additional training although they had good knowledge.

Results suggest that adequate radiotherapy-related education is important in undergraduate dental training. In addition to theoretical knowledge, the incorporation of teaching and clinical training can help students obtain clinical knowledge in order to manage patients under radiotherapy. Multicentre studies on the topic are recommended in the future.

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