

InstaPower Opportunities for dental students to connect with patients without borders

Aisha Ibrahim M. B. Al-Moadhadi¹ | Roudha Mohammed A. M. Al-Naema¹ | Kamran Ali^{1,2}

¹College of Dental Medicine, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

²Faculty of Health (Medicine, Dentistry and Human Sciences), Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK

Correspondence

Kamran Ali, College of Dental Medicine, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar.

Email: ali.kamran@qu.edu.qa

Social media offers tremendous opportunities for professional communities and connecting with public. We would like to share our experience in the use of social media to boost the learning of dental students by connecting with patients and their families. Although not new, there is a growing trend to involve patients to teach medical students and it complements student-centred approaches to medical education. Providing opportunities to medical students for a dialogue with real patients fosters a patient-centred approach in medical education.^{1,2} Such interactions support future healthcare professionals to partner with patients and their families to integrate evidence-based medicine with a commitment to humanism, and empathy.^{2,3} Previous research on patient involvement in medical education has focused on opportunities provided to students through their institutions.^{4,5}

The College of Dental Medicine, Qatar University is the first dental institution offering an undergraduate Dental Program in the State of Qatar and welcomed its first cohort of students in 2019. The 6-year dental programme is based on an integrated, student-led curriculum with a problem-based learning (PBL) approach. One of the PBL cases for Year 3 dental students was based on a case of cleft lip and palate. Whilst working on their PBL case, the students recognised the value of direct interaction with parents of children with cleft lip and palate to better understand their journey and experiences during successive stages of treatment of their children. The students explored the possibility of contacting affected families on social media and were thrilled to identify several mothers on Instagram, a social media platform, particularly popular with younger people. Within seconds of typing hashtags #cleftlip #cleftpalate, the Instagram pages were flooded with patients from all over the world. Based in the Middle East Peninsula,

the students received positive responses from three mothers two of whom were based in the United States (Arizona and New Jersey) and one in Auckland, New Zealand. Following the initial contact, the students were able to organise virtual meetings on Zoom with each mother separately. The students had meaningful interactions with three women who had children born with cleft lip and palate and gained insights into their journeys. The students gained first-hand knowledge of psycho-social and financial impact of this common developmental anomaly on patients and their families. All three women consented to record their interviews to support learning of wider groups of students and did not seek any reward for their contribution. All students in the cohort immensely valued this experience and felt they managed to gain a deeper understanding of the patients' perspectives and experiences over and above what they could have learnt from books and published papers.

This student-led initiative highlights the power of social media to enable students in healthcare professions to contact patients and their families and gain a first-hand understanding of their journey following diagnosis of medical conditions requiring protracted treatment over several years. Notwithstanding the need for compliance with social media ethics and guidelines, web connectivity can provide unprecedented learning opportunities for students to engage with patients and their caregivers. Geographic borders may no longer pose a barrier for learners, nor does learning need to be confined to four walls of healthcare institutions. Virtual interactions on social media have the potential to transform educational environments for healthcare students to a new level by giving them more control, freedom and choices to enhance their learning by direct interactions with patients and the public at large.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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How to cite this article: Al-Moadhadi AIMB, Al-Naema RMAM, Ali K. InstaPower Opportunities for dental students to connect with patients without borders. *Eur J Dent Educ*. 2022;00:1-2. doi: [10.1111/eje.12864](https://doi.org/10.1111/eje.12864)