



## Dental schools, medical centers, and research universities



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As dental education has evolved over the years, many positive changes have occurred, including the comprehensive training in basic and medical sciences that all dental students now undergo, in addition to specific training in dentistry. With the growing interest in dentistry and the opening of many new dental schools, leaders in dental education should work to predict future trends and anticipate needs. In order to continue providing a relevant and meaningful dental education, one important question is raised: should a dental school be affiliated with a medical center or research university?

To my knowledge, there is no study that has addressed this topic. Before answering this question, we should first revisit the definition of dentistry. The American Dental Association defines the profession of dentistry as: "The evaluation, diagnosis, prevention and/or treatment (nonsurgical, surgical, or related procedures) of diseases, disorders and/or conditions of the oral cavity, maxillofacial area and/or the adjacent and associated structures and their impact on the human body; provided by a dentist, within the scope of his/her education, training, and experience, in accordance with the ethics of the profession and applicable law." This definition does not provide any argument to support association with a medical center or research university. Nevertheless, there's little room for debate that understanding the impact on the entire human body would be taught better in an environment that provides medical treatment to other areas of the body.

Moreover, life expectancies have improved, significantly increasing the average age of patients and thus

the possibility of encountering medically complex patients in the dental chair. Today, older adults maintain more teeth for most of their lives, rather than the previously common alternative of using dentures. Well-trained dentists should feel comfortable seeing patients with complicated medical conditions in their practices.

This knowledge and skill set will be taught better in an environment that allows interaction with specialists in various medical fields. Dental schools that are not affiliated with medical centers can and probably should refer students to rotations in relevant medical departments.

In addition, the global effort to provide evidence-based dental treatment emphasizes the importance of affiliation to a research university. Having solid, well-conducted research data will not only improve the treatment offered by dentists, it may also protect dentists from legal liability. Dental schools that are not associated with a research university can also focus on evidence-based teaching; however, the culture of a research university and research conducted in the dental school together create a more influential and effective academic environment.

There is no doubt dentistry can be taught well by dedicated faculty in any institution. But with the trends evolving in the medical and dental fields, the students, and ultimately the patients, are best served when dental schools are associated with both medical centers and research.

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