



Expectations of dentistry students regarding the supervised internship in the Unified Health System


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Abstract Supervised internship is an important stage in the training of dental surgeons by integrating students into practice scenarios in the Unified Health System (SUS). This study aimed to analyze the expectations of dentistry students regarding their SUS supervised internships. This was a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study conducted with fifth-year dentistry students from a public higher education institution in the northern region of the state of Paraná. Semi-structured interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis. The results revealed two categories: "Living New Experiences, Contributing to Professional Training" and "Insecurity." Dentistry students recognize the importance of supervised internships for their academic development because they provide greater insight into the SUS and professional experience and performance in various practice settings.

Descriptors: Students, Dental. Qualitative Research. Unified Health System.

Expectativas de los estudiantes de odontología en relación al internado supervisado en el Sistema Único de Salud

Resumen La Práctica Supervisada es una etapa importante en el proceso de formación del cirujano dentista, incorporando al estudiante a los escenarios de práctica del Sistema Único de Salud (SUS). El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar las expectativas de los estudiantes de Odontología sobre la pasantía supervisada en el SUS. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, descriptiva y exploratoria, realizada con estudiantes de quinto año de Odontología, de una Institución de Enseñanza Superior pública de la región Norte de Paraná. Las entrevistas semiestructuradas fueron videograbadas, transcritas y analizadas mediante el método de análisis de contenido. Los resultados apuntaron a dos categorías: "Viviendo nuevas experiencias, contribuyendo a la formación profesional" e "Inseguridad". Los estudiantes de odontología comprenden la importancia del internado supervisado para su formación académica, ya que les permite una mayor aproximación, conocimiento y experiencia del SUS, además de experiencia y desempeño profesional en diversos escenarios de práctica.

Descriptores: Estudiantes de Odontología. Investigación Cualitativa. Sistema Unico de Salud.

Expectativas de discentes de Odontologia quanto ao estágio supervisionado no Sistema Único de Saúde

Resumo O Estágio Supervisionado é uma importante etapa no processo de formação do cirurgião-dentista, incorporando o discente em cenários de prática do Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS). O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar as expectativas de discentes de Odontologia acerca do estágio supervisionado no SUS. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, descritiva e exploratória, realizada com estudantes do quinto ano de Odontologia, de uma Instituição de Ensino Superior pública da região Norte do Paraná. As entrevistas semiestructuradas foram videograbadas, transcritas e analisadas pelo método de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados apontaram duas categorias: "Vivenciar novas experiências, contribuindo para a formação profissional" e "Insegurança". Os discentes de Odontologia compreendem a importância do estágio supervisionado para a sua formação acadêmica, uma vez que permite uma maior aproximação, conhecimento e vivência do SUS, além da experiência profissional e atuação em cenários diversificados de prática.

Descritores: Estudantes de Odontologia. Pesquisa Qualitativa. Sistema Único de Saúde.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Curricular Guidelines (NCG) for Dentistry courses, according to Resolution No. 3 of June 21, 2021, guide the curricular organization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the country. The NCG seeks to guide the training of dentists (DS) with a generalist, humanistic, and ethical profile, capable of working in a team, proactive and entrepreneurial, communicative, critical, and reflective, to work in dental practice at all levels of health care, and aware and participatory in the face of policies and technological innovations. In addition, the NCG recommends the Unified Health System (SUS) as an integral part of the undergraduate program, providing a setting for professional practice and learning¹. In this context, the Supervised Internship (SI) is seen as an important curricular component for compliance with the NCG in health courses, inserting students into SUS practice scenarios, and establishing links between public and private HEIs with public health services^{2,3}.

The internship is a mandatory curricular component and is understood as a supervised educational activity carried out in a real work environment. During the internship, students develop activities directly related to their general and specific professional skills. The internship may be completed in environments internal or external to HEIs and corresponds to 20% of the total course workload¹. In practice, the internship contributes to technical improvement and better understanding of social, cultural, economic, and epidemiological realities, leading to a real impact on professional training through the integration of teaching, service, and community⁴. The integration of HEIs and health services is a relevant strategy for achieving universal access and comprehensive care. It also provides opportunities for interprofessional education, which is necessary for addressing society's health problems and needs⁵.

Contact with the reality of health services through SI is an important strategy for preparing future DS because it provides an opportunity to develop the skills and abilities necessary to work in the public health system in clinical, managerial, critical, ethical, and humanistic senses⁶. Reichert et al. (2015)⁷ revealed that, according to students, the internship contributed to developing new strategies for the service, as well as for health promotion, prevention, and education. This increased population participation and enhanced the work of public service professionals. Toledo and collaborators⁵ demonstrate that SI contributes to training professionals who can adequately meet the population's needs and demonstrate the social commitment provided for in the SUS guidelines. SI also improves understanding of the care process and provides training that fosters critical thinking about the challenges, advances, and weaknesses of oral health policy in the context of the SUS⁸.

International evidence supports the effectiveness of internships in training. Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom have shown that internships provide students with valuable learning experiences. These studies demonstrate that internships not only show enthusiasm for working outside universities but also foster confidence in skills and clinical practice development⁹⁻¹¹. However, few qualitative studies in the literature have assessed the expectations and perspectives of dentistry students regarding their experiences during the SI in the SUS^{12,13}. This type of assessment is valuable because it allows us to understand students' perspectives on the relevance of the SI in professional training. Thus, this study aimed to analyze the expectations of dentistry students regarding the Supervised Internship in the SUS.

METHOD

Research Design

This qualitative, descriptive, exploratory research was conducted from July 2022 to April 2023. As a scientific method, qualitative research requires an understanding of and deeper knowledge about phenomena from the participants' perceptions in a natural and relational context of the surrounding reality, based on their experiences, opinions, and meanings, in order to express their subjectivities¹⁴.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were applied to fifth-year students of the dentistry course at a public Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the northern region of the state of Paraná. The interviews were videotaped and transcribed. They were carried out until speech saturation¹⁵ was reached, and they were analyzed using the content analysis method¹⁶. A semi-structured script was used to conduct these interviews. We also sought to follow the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines¹⁷.

Research Scenario

The dentistry program at the aforementioned HEI is divided into five years, and the SI in the HEI's public health systems takes place in the 5th year, through the subject "Supervised Multiprofessional Internship," which has a workload of 225 hours/class. Students in the 5th year are paired up and have the opportunity to gain experience with different levels of complexity, in various public health services, such as: Dental Emergency Room, Children's Specialty Clinic (Bebê-

Clínica/UEL), Dental Surgical Center (University Dental Clinic/UEL) and Stomatology Outpatient Clinic (University Dental Clinic/UEL) and Public Dental Services Network.

Students are then distributed among the Basic Health Units (UBS), Family Health Units (USF), and the Dental Specialties Center (CEO) of the Public Dental Services Network in the municipalities of Cambé, Ibiporã, Londrina, and Rolândia. The Public Health Action Organizational Contract facilitates this integration between HEIs and municipalities, enabling the implementation of SI in the public health system.

The internship allows students to interact with the oral health team and other health professionals, gain experience in clinical practice in dental offices at the UBS, USF, and CEO. Students also carry out health promotion and prevention activities in settings such as early childhood education centers and schools, and make home visits together with preceptors. These health actions are carried out according to the oral health team's demands. Professors and preceptors jointly evaluate the teaching and learning process during the SI, considering clinical conduct and production, as well as cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal aspects (<http://www.uel.br/graduacao/odontologia/portal/>).

Research Participants

The sample was intentionally selected for convenience, according to the inclusion criteria: students over 18 years old, among the 67 students enrolled in the 5th year of the dentistry program at the HEI, who have not yet completed the supervised internship at the SUS, and who agreed to the Informed Consent (IC).

Interviews

A semi-structured script based on the study by Santos (2016)¹⁸ was developed to conduct the interviews, consisting of topics related to the perspectives of dentistry students regarding supervised internships during their undergraduate studies, the importance of internships for professional training, and the challenges they face. To ensure anonymity, the subjects were coded with the letter "E" followed by an ordinal number indicating the order in which the interviews were conducted: (E1), (E2), (E3), and so on.

One interviewer was responsible for all interviews. She was a 5th-year undergraduate student in the dentistry program who had been trained and qualified by an experienced researcher in qualitative research. Calibration was carried out through a pilot interview, which helped finalize the structure of the interview script and eliminate biases that could be observed when listening to the recordings. To maintain impartiality during the interviews and data analysis, there was no relationship of interest or work between the parties.

The interviews were conducted in person in a classroom environment at the HEI, in compliance with the measures for the prevention, monitoring, and control of COVID-19, recommended by the Health Department of the State of Paraná (SESA resolution 735/2021). They took place in August 2022, lasted an average of 15 minutes, and during each interview, the interviewer took individual notes in an attempt to capture the students' perceptions. The interviews were recorded using the Google Meet® platform, and the research database was stored in a secure online location.

Analysis Procedures

At the end of each interview, the interviewer transcribed it manually to enable longitudinal analysis without altering the content. Key expressions and central ideas were identified and defined as registration units. According to the context, the recording units were grouped by meaning to form categories. The transcripts were subjected to the content analysis technique¹⁶.

Consensus meetings were held weekly to define the categories. Two researchers with experience in qualitative research categorized the data in these meetings. In cases of doubt regarding category identification, a third researcher was consulted to resolve disagreements. After reaching a consensus on the categories, the interviews were analyzed again for the final analysis.

Ethical Aspects

All research subjects were initially contacted in person or by telephone. The interviews were conducted after the IC was signed. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee Involving Human Beings of the State University of Londrina, following the guidelines and regulatory standards for research involving human beings (resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council). The study was approved with opinion number 5,223,230 and CAEE number 53128021.8.0000.5231.

RESULTS

Ten students were interviewed: seven females and three males. They were identified as follows: E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9 and E10. Their ages ranged from 22 to 26 years old.

The study revealed that two categories emerged from the interviews: *"Living new experiences, contributing to professional training"* and *"Insecurity"*. The main responses obtained from the interviews are presented in Figure 1.

CATEGORIES	REGISTRATION UNITS
Living new experiences, contributing to professional training	<p><i>"The internship will allow us to experience a different reality than the one we experience in university clinics. While at UBS, we will experience the reality of a healthcare service and get a closer look at what we will encounter after graduation."</i> (E9)</p> <p><i>"I believe that the internship will provide an opportunity to work with other professionals. We will interact with different people and environments, and professionals with experience working within the SUS. Everything will be new, and this is certainly something we will have to deal with for the rest of our lives. I understand that the job market will not always consist of people we know, so this will be a valuable experience."</i> (E3)</p> <p><i>"We talk a lot about multidisciplinarity in dentistry, but we don't really practice it. I think that during our internships at UBS, where we will be surrounded by professionals from various health fields, we will have more opportunities to interact with other areas. I hope to witness many exchanges of experiences and knowledge."</i> (E4)</p> <p><i>"[...] the supervised internship is very important for our professional training. It is a unique opportunity to apply everything we have learned in an environment that is completely different from what we are used to."</i> (E5)</p> <p><i>"I think the internship is important because it allows us to leave our comfort zone and experience another reality. We get to see that there are different ways of working and that we can work with different people and professionals. This will greatly contribute to my professional growth."</i> (E7)</p> <p><i>"I believe that it is precisely during the internship that we begin to understand what it's like to practice our profession in the SUS, what day-to-day life as a professional is like, and what we can do in terms of procedures, patient care, and teamwork. It is the most realistic way for us to envision our professional future and have an idea of what to expect."</i> (E9)</p>
Insecurity	<p><i>"I feel a little insecure. It will be a new environment, different from what we are used to. We will work with different people. Even though there is supervision from the preceptor, the reality will be different from what we are used to in university clinics [...]"</i> (E1)</p> <p><i>"[...] the biggest insecurity is perhaps making a mistake or a patient arriving and needing something and misdiagnosing them [...]"</i> (E2)</p> <p><i>"I think it's adapting to a new routine, learning how things work, getting used to the new team, and adjusting to the environment of a Basic Health Unit [...]"</i> (E8)</p> <p><i>"Even though I know the theory and what should be done, I feel insecure, like I might make a mistake or misdiagnose a patient. That makes me quite fearful."</i> (E6)</p> <p><i>"I don't know what the preceptor will be like, or if we'll be able to ask for help, or if he'll let us work alone more. I'm afraid he'll give us more freedom to perform procedures, and I'll be a little lost [...]"</i> (E5)</p> <p><i>"My biggest challenge during the internship will be the absence of the professor. The professor is always there to answer our questions and correct our mistakes. During the internship, we won't have that much. We'll have our preceptor, and he'll help, but I don't think it'll be the same."</i> (E2)</p>

Figure 1. Categories and respective registration units indicating the perspectives of dentistry students regarding supervised internship in the SUS.

DISCUSSION

When discussing students' perceptions of what they will experience during the internship, we could evaluate how they deal with issues related to the training process. The expectations revealed in this study showed that dentistry students expect the SI to provide new practical experiences that will contribute to their professional training. At the same time, a certain degree of insecurity was identified, mainly due to the unfamiliar learning environment. The following categories emerged: *"Living new experiences, contributing to professional training,"* and *"Insecurity."*

The NCG emphasizes the SUS as a privileged scenario for health training, with the SI being a strategic element for implementing the SUS as an organizer in dentists' training¹⁹. The SI in dentistry provides an environment for acquiring knowledge and skills important for professional practice, becoming an experience with formative dimensions. It offers students the opportunity to participate in real work situations and explore basic skills indispensable for professional training².

Experiencing or practicing in new learning environments broadens students' vision of the work carried out in the public

network¹². Through the integration of teaching, service, and community, the SUS becomes an ideal setting in which students can carry out their roles according to the NCG alongside the communities²⁰. The study identified elements that value "*Living new experiences, contributing to professional training*." Students presented multiprofessionalism as an experience different from what they are used to, outside of university clinics. It is an opportunity to work with professionals within the SUS and learn about the professional daily life in public health services. The desire to experience multiprofessionality confirms the findings of Souza and Rêgo (2022)²¹, Leme *et al.* (2015)²², and Santos *et al.* (2022)¹³, indicating that students understand and value the importance of working with health professionals from different areas.

In Brazil, the paradigm of dentists working in isolation from other health professionals persists. However, the current challenge is to expand and integrate the work of multidisciplinary teams toward an interprofessional perspective, as advocated by the new National Curricular Guidelines for dentistry programs¹. The professional training stage is the ideal time to overcome this paradigm through experiences of interprofessional work and collaborative activities between health professionals that promote the collective construction of knowledge, good communication, and integration with the oral health team.

Studies by Leme *et al.* (2015)²² and Toassi *et al.* (2013)²³ show that practical experience in the field provides an opportunity to learn how the SUS works, experience the daily routine of the UBS, and interact directly with users, families, and the enrolled population. This experience allows students to live with the reality of health in a community. This practical experience is an essential step for gaining experience and learning about professional dental practice outside the university.

Furthermore, the SI allows students to understand the needs and desires of each patient seeking dental care through the SUS while learning the system's benefits, qualities, and flaws. This practical experience is essential for professional improvement²³. Therefore, the internship provides students with practical experience, contact with professionals from other areas, and the opportunity to improve their technical skills. It also allows students to demonstrate awareness of social reality and leaves them with a more generalist and humanized view of performance. This prevents their training from being exclusively focused on individual, curative interventions and financial gains.

The National Curricular Guidelines clearly state that professional training for dentists must include the SUS as a setting for professional practice and a field of study. The interviewees recognize the SUS internship as an important stage in their training. It is an opportunity to apply all the knowledge they acquired during the course in a different environment and experience the work of a dentist in the public health system. The students' perspectives corroborate the work of Emmi, Silva, and Barroso (2023)⁷, who found that the SI trains professionals who are more committed to public health and critical thinking. These professionals truly put the principles of the SUS into practice and gain knowledge that can only be achieved through experience. Experience is fundamental for personal and professional growth and maturity. Baumgarten and Toassi (2013)²⁴ showed that the SI provides students with the opportunity to apply what they learned in the classroom to real-life situations, such as teamwork, meetings, reception, home visits, and reference and counter-reference.

Including students in practical scenarios guided by the SI allows undergraduates to learn to value the collective, develop a more reflective view of users, and gain experience in teamwork. Undergraduates also learn to develop health promotion actions instead of just treating or curing disease, and acquire competencies aimed at professional autonomy^{25,26}. Thus, the SI has the potential to promote relevant academic and practical experiences in the public health system, favoring the formation of a new profile of health professionals who are more qualified, confident, and concerned with their social responsibilities.

A sense of insecurity emerged among the students interviewed as they adapted to a new work environment and the unknown. This perception of "*Insecurity*" can be categorized in this research as being motivated by the beginning of SI, due to the students' lack of experience, fear of the unknown, and uncertainty about what to expect or whether they will have support from preceptors in times of need. Similar results can be found in the works of Souza and Rêgo (2022), Leme *et al.* (2015), and Toassi, Devoglio, and Lemos (2012), where students' insecurity is evident during the initial adaptation. This is their first contact with the SUS, care at the UBS, and a work environment that requires speed and agility.

It is worth noting that anxieties and insecurities were overcome as students developed a sense of belonging to the UBS, health team, and community^{20,21,23,27}. This is also due to the greater preparation of preceptors in welcoming students

who will undertake the internship and assisting them in making better use of and development²⁸.

With the recent update to the National Curricular Guidelines for dentistry programs, DS training should be in and for the SUS. Thus, more qualitative studies are recommended to monitor and evaluate the training process in various practice scenarios. This approach will help students, the service, and the community have successful experiences with this integration.

One limitation of this research was the difficulty in scheduling interviews.

CONCLUSION

Supervised Internship is essential for the integration of teaching, service, and community engagement, thereby strengthening both service quality and the educational process. Dentistry students understand the importance of these internships for their academic training as they provide critical insights into the SUS and offer valuable professional experience across diverse practice scenarios.

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