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Assessing Dental Care Quality: A Comparative Study of Private and Public Clinics in Ahvaz, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Assessing the quality of service provided by dental clinics is crucial for improving patient care. The present study compared the quality of dental care services across private and public dental clinics in Ahvaz, Iran.

Methods and Materials: This cross-sectional study was conducted in public and private dental clinics within Ahvaz, Iran. The sample size, determined via the Cochran formula, comprised 196 individuals aged 18 and above seeking dental treatments. Participants were randomly selected from patient lists, excluding those refusing participation. Data were gathered using the SERVQUAL tool to evaluate service quality gaps. Univariate analyses such as t-tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, one-way ANOVA, and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to compare SERVQUAL scores. Median differences among groups were assessed using quantile regression models.

Results: Participants were primarily female (61.73%), with a mean age of 35.45 years (SD = 12.52). Most were married (68.88%), employed (41.33%), and highly educated (56.41%). Significant differences existed in the demographic and social characteristics of dental clinic individuals. Individuals who visited private dental clinics were predominantly men (58.67% vs. 57.02%; $p = 0.033$), employed, with a high proportion of employees and self-employed individuals compared to housewives (employee: 64.20% and self-employment: 56.41% vs. housewife: 28.95%). They also had a high level of education (55.45% vs. 41.18%, $p = 0.048$) and no previous history of visiting a dental clinic (61.54% vs. 44.44%, $p = 0.035$), in contrast to those who frequented public dental clinics. A notable difference was observed based on health insurance status. People with Tamin (public) health insurance visited private clinics less often than those with other forms of insurance (25.00% vs. 65.52%; $p = 0.001$). There were no significant differences in median SERVQUAL scores based on demographic and social factors ($p = 0.05$). Individuals with a history of physician office visits tended to give lower scores than others ($p = 0.05$). Significant differences in service quality were found between private and public dental clinics. Public clinics displayed lower scores across all aspects measured by SERVQUAL, particularly in tangibles (β = -3; 95% CI: -4.3 to -1.6; $p = 0.001$) and reliability (β = -3; 95% CI: -4.6 to -1.3; $p = 0.001$).

Conclusion and Discussion: The study revealed significant disparities in patients' demographic and social characteristics utilizing private and public dental clinics in Ahvaz, Iran. Private clinics provided higher-quality service, while public clinics notably lacked tangibles and reliability. These findings highlight the importance of public dental clinics improving their service quality to meet their patients' expectations effectively.

Keywords: Dental health service, Iran, Patient satisfaction, Quality of health care

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