

A Study on the Attitude of Patients Towards Dental Appointments in Qatar

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Abstract

The study aimed to reveal the underlying reasons of missed appointments at Dental Hospital of (HMC) in Qatar. 256 patients answered a semi-structured questionnaire. Analysis of the findings provided information regarding the causative factors of un-attended appointments among Qatari and non-Qatari patients, as well as their health perceptions of the impact of broken appointment phenomenon on both healthcare providers and consumers. Results showed that most dental appointments were missed because of travelling and difficulty to get time off work or school, 43% and 20%, respectively. Patients from different socio-cultural backgrounds reported that failed appointments might influence hospital performance, health workers' productivity, and prolong waiting time for other appointments, which could impact consumers' health, adversely. About 78% of patients stated that the reminder system helped them to remember their appointments and 54% of patients used the reminding system service to get other appointments.

In conclusion, the study revealed that the rate of missing appointments in Dentistry was high among different cultural groups. Furthermore, it is apparent that the reminder system seems to be an effective tool to decrease the percentage of broken dental appointments, but other intervening measures are needed to overcome such problem, in order to achieve a competent healthcare system in Qatar.

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Introduction

Missed dental appointments by patients are a common experience in healthcare provision globally.¹ The major consequence of this is that it can affect the continuity and effectiveness of healthcare delivery, appropriate monitoring of health status lapses, and the increases the cost of health services.² Several factors might contribute to missed dental appointments such as barriers to access, fear and poor communication, long lag times and conflicting time commitments between appointments, barriers to access, and simple forgetfulness. Though the reason for missed dental appointment is justifiable from the patient's point of view, it still has a negative impact on the

health system.³

Qatar is an independent emirate on the west coast of the Arabian Gulf. Eighty-six percent of the total population is comprised of expatriates mainly from India, Pakistan, Philippines, and Nepal, which led to the development of a multicultural context, where "Arabic, English, Hindi, and Urdu" are almost the well-known communicative languages in the country.^{4, 5} Qataris comprise about twenty percent of the population and around eighty five percent of them are between the age of 15 and 65.⁶ Qatar has a highly developing healthcare system that has been ranked in the world's top five in terms of quality of care. The healthcare system in Qatar consists of free or subsidized public healthcare in which expats living and working there can apply to access this or choose to be treated privately.⁷

Though the state has applied modern technology in health care, as well as free of charge services for Qataris and minimal charges for non-Qataris the healthcare system is still facing obstacles. For example, cultural challenges⁶ and missed medical appointments

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jeopardize healthcare efficiency in Qatar.⁸ Basically, cultures imply sharing similar norms, behaviors, and languages. Bearing in mind that there are many factors that are influencing and changing any culture gradually, such as education, economy, and politics.⁹ Hence, various cultural communities are affected differently by many variables, which could be related to environment, societal structure, language, place, and time. Consequently, these factors have differentiated nations from each other as well as they have influenced different health systems¹⁰. Thus, there has been an apparent relationship between cultural measures and health care aspects. The healthcare providers-customers relations, including relatives' involvement, which are all culturally determined and this has been an important matter in a diverse society like in Qatar.¹¹

Individuals from the same environmental culture might have different behaviors toward being healthy or approaching health practices, which has depended on their knowledge and opinions, in addition to their inherited cultural beliefs.⁹ Only limited studies have explored the effect of cultures on humans' wellness and illness. In Arabic culture gender-specific matching process between physicians and patients has helped in medical management and reaching successful results.¹² Missed appointments serve as a key indicator for adherence to therapy and as such, identifying patient reasons for this inconsistency could assist in developing programs to improve health outcomes.¹³ Missed dental appointments by patients are a common phenomenon in dental care and different dental procedures. Only studies have looked at the issue of missing dental appointments in the Middle East.¹⁴ Hence, the objective of the study was to identify the reasons and the patient's perspective about the missed dental appointments at the outpatient Dental Department at Hamad Medical Corporation.

Materials and methods

The study was carried by selecting patients who missed their appointments, during a period of one month, at outpatient clinics of the Department of Dentistry at Hamad Medical Corporation in Doha. Ethical clearance was obtained for the study from the Medical Research Centre, Hamad Medical Corporation. First,

patients' demographic information was obtained from the hospital data-based records. The interviewer attempted to contact randomly 400 patients who missed their dental appointments during April 2016, to conduct a telephone-based survey. 256 patients responded to the interviewer, while 111 patients could not be reached. Meanwhile, 22 patients refused to participate in the study and 11 patients could not be contacted because of wrong or no numbers. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants and also notified that they could discontinue their participation at any moment during the interview. The respondents were informed that their answers would be confidential, and their identities won't be included in the study.

A simplified questionnaire was developed by the researcher to collect data, retrospectively. The questions were based on earlier studies to reveal the reasons of missed appointments studies^{15, 16}. Qualitative research was conducted in the form of interviews with patients who missed their dental appointments, in order to reveal the reasons of unattended appointments among citizens and non-citizens, as well as to find the relationship between culture as a factor and broken appointments. The interviewees answered a semi structured, survey-based questionnaire that examined patients' perceptions for missed appointments, its impacts on both consumers and health providers. Evaluated patients' opinions of the best solutions that might intervene to solve the phenomena of missed appointments in hospitals.

The survey covered different questions that answered various patient's demographical aspects such as, age, gender, nationality, spoken language, marital status, level of education, employment, income, type of housing, location of residence, means of transportation, methods of remembering and getting hospital appointments, as well as, reasons of failed appointments. Addition to, 5 points of rating scale questions that examined patients' perceptions of missed appointments, its negative consequences, as well as patients' perceptions of proposed solutions.

Results

A total number of 5020 patients were booked for dental appointments during April 2016, but 18% of them (n = 905) did not attend their

scheduled appointments. The researcher selected randomly a sample of 400 patients out of the 905 patients, in order to interview them and answer a semi-structured survey questionnaire. Out of the 400-selected sample, only 64% of patients (n = 256) who were 18 years and above agreed to complete the questionnaire, while 27.7% of patients (n = 111) could not be reached. Yet, 5.5% of patients (n = 22) refused to participate in the survey, where as 2.7% of patients (n = 11) could not be contacted, because they had wrong or no telephone numbers (Fig. 1).

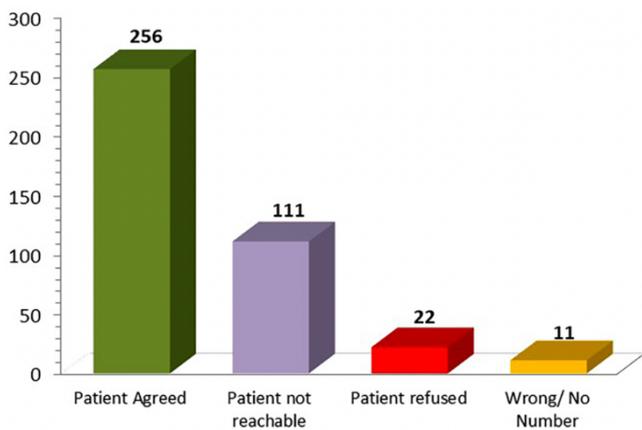


Figure 1. Distribution of the total number of patients contacted (256/400 patients).

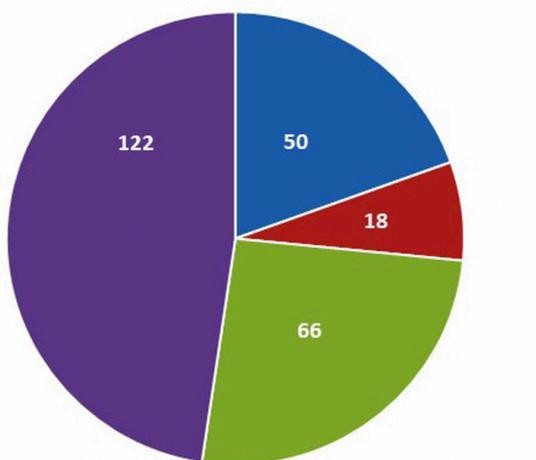


Figure 2. Means of transportation.

Basically, of the surveyed sample, 62% were female patients (n = 168) and 38% were male patients (n = 88). 54% of patients (n = 139) were "Qataris" and 46% were "non-Qataris" (n =

117), who were 18 years and above, mainly educated, employed, middle class, married, owning houses, and living in Doha (Table 1). About, 48% of patients (n = 122) drove their own cars to attend dental appointments in the hospital (Fig. 2).

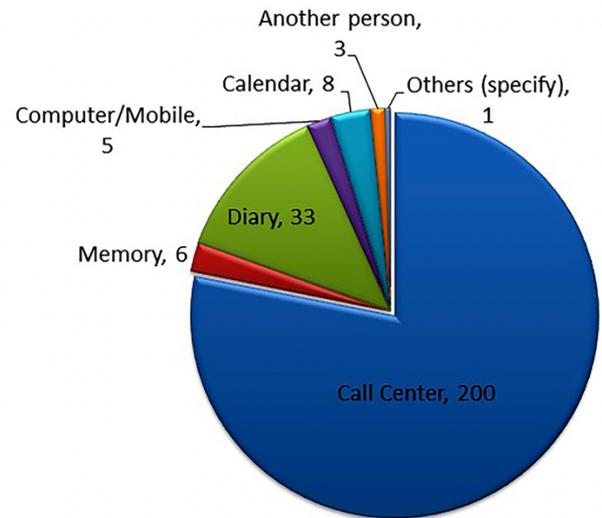


Figure 3. The methods used to remind the appointments.

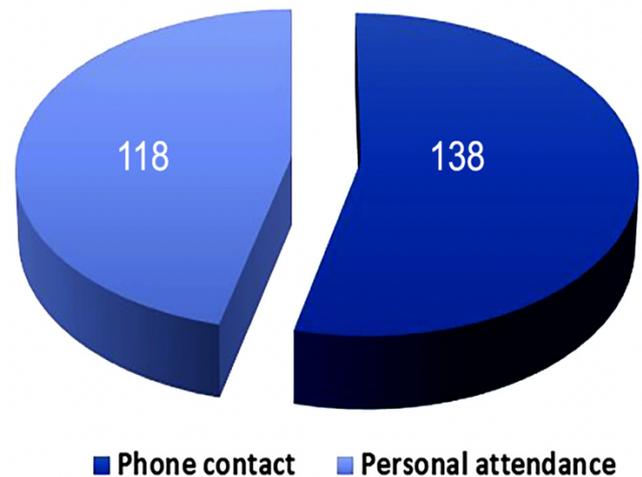


Figure 4. Mode of obtaining appointments.

Mostly, 78% of respondents (n = 200) stated that they remembered their appointments by phone-calls from the call center (reminder system) (Fig. 3). At the same time, 54% of participants (n = 138) reported that they had to contact the call center in order to get new appointments in the case they missed their dental appointments, where as 46% of participants (n = 118) had to go personally to the dental department to get other appointments (Fig.

4).

Nationality		No (%)
	Qatari	139 (54)
	Non-Qatari	117 (46)
Gender		
	Male	88 (34)
	Female	168 (66)
Age		
	18-30 yrs.	96 (38)
	31-50 yrs.	86 (34)
	51-60 yrs.	48 (19)
	60 yrs. and above	26 (10)
Monthly Income		
	High	30 (12)
	Middle	190 (74)
	Low	36 (14)
Education		
	Middle school	68 (27)
	High School	72 (28)
	University	116 (45)
Occupation		
	Employed	138 (54)
	Unemployed	118 (46)
Housing		
	Own	160 (62.5)
	Rented	96 (37.5)
Language		
	Arabic	213 (83)
	English	16 (6)
	Others	27 (11)
Residence		
	City Center	180 (70)
	Outside City	76 (30)

Table 1. Demographic information.

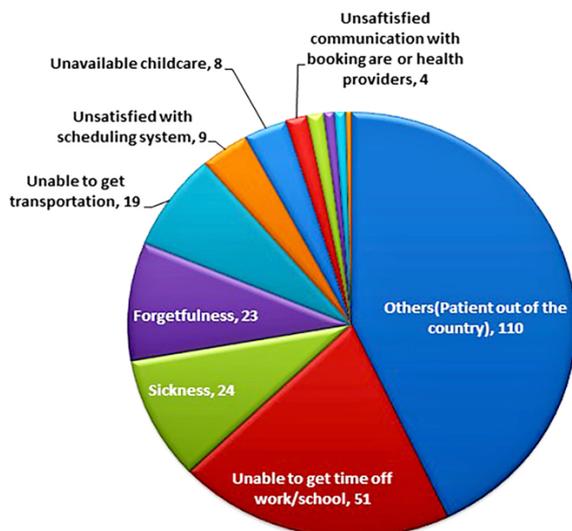


Figure 5. Reasons for missed appointments.

For reasons of broken appointments, the highest number of the patients (n = 110), about 43%, missed their appointment because of being outside “Qatar” during the time of the appointment, followed by inability to get time off work or school; 20% of patients (n = 51). However, about 37% of participants (n = 95) reported other reasons for missing appointments such as being sick, forgetting appointments, unavailability of transportation, laziness, unavailability of childcare, or dissatisfaction with the scheduling system or with healthcare providers (Fig. 5).

About 38% (n = 96) patients who were 18-30 years old missed their appointments, because they were unable to get time off work or school. While, 10% (n = 27) elderly patients, who were 60 years and above broke their appointments, because of forgetfulness. Meanwhile, about 49.6% (n = 127) of participants in the survey strongly agreed that missing appointments would prolong waiting time for other appointments. Nearly, both numbers of male and female patients “Qataris” and “non-Qataris” strongly agreed on that. As well as, 56.6% (n = 145) of patients strongly agreed that missing appointments would influence their health, negatively. Furthermore, about (34.7%) of respondents (n = 89) agreed that broken dental appointments would waste health care providers’ productivity time and consume economical resources. About 35.5% of patients (n = 91) believed that missing appointments would affect the hospital’s performance and the quality of health care.

Around 78% (n = 200) of respondents agreed that setting a reminder system would reduce missed appointments and about 55% (n = 140) of patients agreed that choosing the appointment’s date and time would decrease the number of unattended appointments. Meanwhile, 39% (n = 100) of subjects agreed that it could be useful using of a double-booking system and 51% (n = 130) of respondents agreed that increasing public awareness of the impact of missing appointments might reduce the number of broken appointments.

Discussion

Oral health literacy is an important factor that could influence the use of dental care

facilities. Factors including finance, time constraints, cultural bias, and difficulty understanding scheduling systems influence patient compliance with dental appointments.^{17, 18} Broken scheduled appointments in hospitals have resulted in wasted budgets and extra expenses, in order to manage this problem.¹⁹ Non-Qatari male patients missed the dental appointments because they could not get time off work or school. Meanwhile, few patients, who were mostly females, missed their appointments, because of unavailability of transportation or childcare. Thus, being out of the country and difficulty to obtain time off work or school were the major reasons for missing appointments, which is in agreement with other studies.^{15, 16}

Patients in the age group 18-31 years old missed their appointments, because they were unable to get time off work or school. On the other hand, elderly patients who were 61 years and above have broken their appointments, because they forgot them. This finding concurs with the study of Samuels et al²⁰ who mentioned that the patient's age and gender could play a role in missing appointments in hospitals.

All patients agreed that missed appointments would prolong waiting time for other appointments and influence their and other patients' health, negatively. Also, most patients, both genders, especially non-Qataris agreed that broken appointments would waste healthcare providers' productivity time and consume economical resources, which is in agreement with an earlier study, which stated that those missed appointments adversely affect both consumers and health providers.²¹

Conclusions

Qatar has a diverse socio-cultural environment that influenced all aspects of life especially healthcare system, which has been impacted by missed appointments in hospitals. The study showed that both "Qatari" and "non-Qatari" patients missed their appointments at outpatient's dental clinics.

- Female patients missed their appointments more frequently because of travelling outside, unavailability of transportation or being committed to a childcare, which could be explained as barriers to access to healthcare services.
- Non-Qatari male patients broke their

appointments because of difficulty to get time off work or school.

- Non- Qatari patients are more aware of the negative impacts of missing appointments on providers' productivity, hospitals' performance, and economical resources.
- Patients from different socio-cultural backgrounds agreed that missed appointments might be solved by many measures, especially by setting an efficient reminder system, allowing patients to choose the time of appointment or double-booking system.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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