

# Who is thought to be a "reliable dentist"? – Lithuanian dentists' opinion

*Alina Puriene, Irena Balciuniene, Povilas Drobnys*

## SUMMARY

The aim. To find out which attributes, according to Lithuanian dentists, are the most important for a "reliable dentist".

Materials and methods. All the 140 participants of republican dentists' conference were given a questionnaire. The response rate was 64,3%. The answers about the importance of dentist's attributes were presented on a 5-point Likert scale. The statistical data analysis, using the  $\chi^2$  criterion was carried out.

Results. The importance of behaviour during painful and unpleasant procedures, painless treatment and ability to control stressful situations was emphasized by 87%, 83% and 76% of respondents. To add, qualification, communication skills, ability to answer patient's questions clearly, respecting patient's confidentiality were accentuated as well by 78%, 82%, 84% and 74% of dentists. Although, gender was not an essential quality for 78% of respondents, 62% of them reported that dentist's age was very important. Those, who are over 30, emphasized the value of erudition ( $\chi^2=0.464$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), punctuality ( $\chi^2=25.467$ ;  $p=0.001$ ), specialization ( $\chi^2=15.808$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), low treatment cost ( $\chi^2=17.393$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) more significantly than their younger colleagues. No need to wait for a dentist's appointment was appreciated more by respondents, whose work experience is over 30 years ( $\chi^2=20.601$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

Conclusions. Most Lithuanian dentists emphasized the importance of pain management, painless treatment, behaviour during painful and unpleasant procedures, communication skills and ability to answer patient's questions clearly, which are vital for a „reliable dentist“.

**Key words:** Lithuanian dentists, reliability attributes.

Various dentist's personality, work, scientific activity and other attributes are known to be important for the patients. Dental work involves exposure to an intimate and very sensitive area of the human body, it is a unique social interaction influenced by specific demands of the clinical practice [1]. However when Lithuanians were asked how they chose their dentist, the majority replied they would prefer a reliable one (A.Pūrienė et al., 2007). Therefore we decided to ask dentists themselves what criteria define a reliable dentist's concept.

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*\*Institute of Odontology, Faculty of Medicine, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania*

*Alina Puriene\* – DDS, PhD, assoc. professor  
Irena Balciuniene\* – DDS  
Gailute Grigaitė\* – DDS*

*Address correspondence to Dr. Alina Puriene, Zalgiris Clinic  
Vilnius University Hospital, Zalgirio 117, LT-08217 Vilnius,  
Lithuania.  
E-mail address: alina.puriene@gmail.com*

## INTRODUCTION

Dentists are known to be professionals. Professionalism is the basis of Medicine and Dentistry's contract with society. It demands that the interests of patients are placed above those of the caregiver, that standards of competence be established and adhered to, and that expert advice be provided to society on matters of health [2]. Professionalism involves many professional responsibilities, such as commitment to professional competence, honesty with patients, patient confidentiality, maintaining appropriate relations with patients etc, which influence public's trust in its physicians and dentists. 46% of dentists surveyed in R. O'Shea, N. Corah and W. Ayer study [3] indicated that distrust was seen as the main reason for switching dentists [4]. Despite that middle-aged well-educated middle-income Lithuanians are known to be frequent dental visitors, highly satisfied with their dentist [5]. Trust

in a dentist comes from a variety of personality, work and scientific activity attributes. However, many studies [6-9] emphasize the importance of confidentiality and communication skills, which were reported to be one of the most important qualities among dentist's personality attributes. Confidentiality was observed to influence the dentist-patient relationship, where trust comes from the assurance that personal information will be kept confidential, that procedures are in the patient's best interest, and that patient autonomy is recognized [6]. Moreover, dentist's ability to communicate clearly and effectively is one of the underlying factors assuring a successful dentist-patient relationship and the key to all outcomes of the dental practice. According to previous studies [7-9], communicative, emphatic and informative dentists were preferred. Redford, H. C. Gift [10], S. Lathi et al [11] indicated that dentist-patient interactions play an important role in treatment decision-making and influence patient's willingness to cooperate, which is particularly important.

Although dentists are still highly regarded and widely trusted by the majority of the populace, many professional responsibilities makes being a reliable dentist challenging. Professionals are expected to be not only communicative, emphatic, respecting patient's confidentiality, maintaining appropriate relations with patients etc, but also be committed to lifelong learning and be responsible for maintaining the medical knowledge, clinical and team-skills necessary for the provision of quality care. Understanding dentists' expectations and perceptions helps to identify those core qualities that lead to patient's compliance and treatment success. There was no similar study among Lithuanian dentists and this is the first study about dentist's reliability in Lithuania.

#### **The aim of the study:**

To find out which attributes, according to Lithuanian dentists, are the most important for a "reliable dentist".

#### **SUBJECTS AND METHODS**

All the 140 participants of republican dentists' conference were given an anonymous questionnaire, which was approved by the Lithuanian Bioethical Committee Nr. 59, 2007. The questionnaire included a number of questions about dentist's personality, work and scientific activity attributes. The majority of them were structured, and a few open questions were added. The answers about the importance of

dentist's attributes were presented on a 5-point Likert scale allocated according to the level of importance with the given dentist's quality: 1 – not important at all, 2 – not important, 3 – might be important, 4 – important, 5 – very important. The questionnaire also obtained information about the personal and professional characteristics of the subjects including gender, age, and work experience. Statistical analysis was undertaken using the MS Office, Excel and SPSS version 13.0 software packages. For clarity, the answers were classified into 3 groups according to the importance with the specific attribute: very important (they included very important and important), might be important and not important at all (not important at all together with not important ones). The data were analyzed using descriptive and analytic methods. In order to determine associations between respondent's age, work experience, place of residence and various dentist's attributes, the univariate analyses were performed using  $\chi^2$  criterion. Only statistically significant results are described.

#### **RESULTS**

Ninety one percent of respondents, who participated in this study, were females and only 9% males. The response rate was 64.3%.

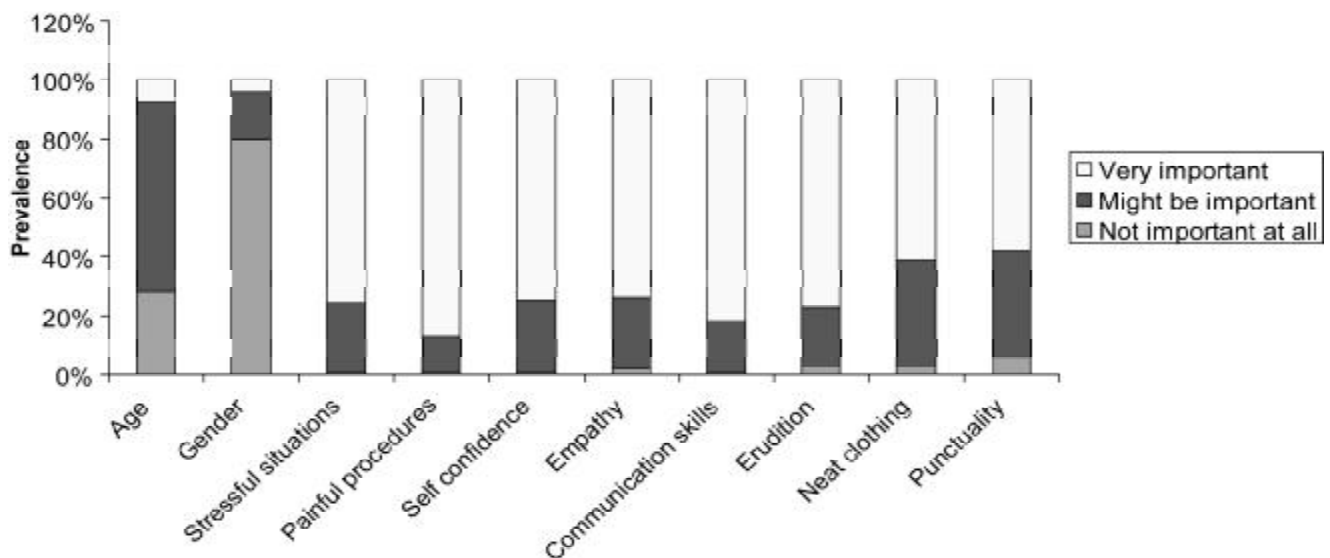
The respondents were arranged in 3 age groups: 1) <30 years 2) 31 – 50 years 3) >50 years. The majority of them (46%) were over 50 years old. The mean age was 47 years.

84% of respondents live in major Lithuanian cities, 14% live in district's centres and 2% – in rural areas. Mean respondents' work experience – 23.59 years.

#### **Dentist's personality attributes:**

The results showed that behavior during painful and unpleasant procedures was found to be the most important quality among dentist's personality attributes for even 87% of respondents. Erudition, ability to control stressful situations, self – confidence, communication skills were also reported to be core qualities for 77%, 76%, 75% and 82% of dentists respectively. (Fig. 1.). Although dentist's gender was not important at all for 80% of respondents, 64% of them reported that dentist's age was essential. Neat clothing and punctuality were also found to be very important for 61% and 58% of dentists.

A statistically significant relation was observed between respondent's age and the importance of dentist's punctuality ( $\chi^2=25.467$ ;  $p=0.001$ ) and erudition ( $\chi^2=20.464$ ;  $p<0.01$ ). As respondent's age in-



**Fig. 1.** The distribution of importance according to dentist's personality attributes

creased, the importance of these attributes also increased (Table 1).

**Dentist's work attributes**

As observed in previous studies, information – giving quality is substantial not only for patients but also for dentists themselves. Even 84% of respondents emphasized the importance of answering patient's questions clearly. The majority of them (87%) reported that behavior during painful, unpleasant procedures and painless treatment were essential attributes. Qualification, respecting patient's confidentiality, manual skills were also observed to be necessary by 78%, 74% and 71% of respondents respectively (Fig. 2.). Modern equipment was found to be much more important than dentist's work experience. Convenience oriented attributes, such as hours of attendance, parking facilities, clinic's interior, convenient location of dental office, no need to wait for an appointment, and treatment cost were not emphasized.

A statistically significant relation between respondents' age and dentist's specialization ( $\chi^2=15.808$ ;

$p<0.05$ ), low treatment cost ( $\chi^2=17.393$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), neat clinic's interior ( $\chi^2=24.404$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), parking facilities ( $\chi^2=19.984$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) was noticed. These attributes were much more important for respondents, who are over 30, compared to those, who are under 30.

A similar statistically significant relation between respondents' work experience and low treatment cost ( $\chi^2=27.888$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), no need to wait for an appointment ( $\chi^2=20.601$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), neat clinic's interior ( $\chi^2=33.307$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), parking facilities ( $\chi^2=35.029$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ) was observed. These qualities were much more important for respondents, whose work experience is over 20 years (Table 1).

**Dentist's scientific attributes**

Excellent knowledge of dental science was the most important of dentist's scientific attributes for even 72% of respondents (Fig. 3.). A statistically significant relation between respondents' work experience and dentist's degree was investigated. This quality was much more essential for respondents, whose work experience is over 30 years ( $\chi^2=22.656$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=0.031$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table.** Relations between respondents' age, work experience and various dentist's work attributes

Dentist's work attributes	Age		Work experience	
	$\chi^2$	p	$\chi^2$	p
Specialization	15.808*	$p<0.05^*$	20.701	$p>0.05$
Low treatment cost	17.393*	$p<0.05^*$	27.888*	$p<0.01^*$
Neat clinic's interior	24.404*	$p<0.01^*$	33.307*	$p<0.001^*$
Parking facilities	19.984*	$p<0.01^*$	35.029*	$p<0.0001^*$
No need to wait for an appointment	10.391	$p<0.1$	20.601*	$p<0.05^*$
Punctuality	25.467*	$p=0.001^*$	6.528	$p>0.05$
Erudition	20.464*	$p<0.01^*$	20.272	$p>0.05$

\* statistically significant result.

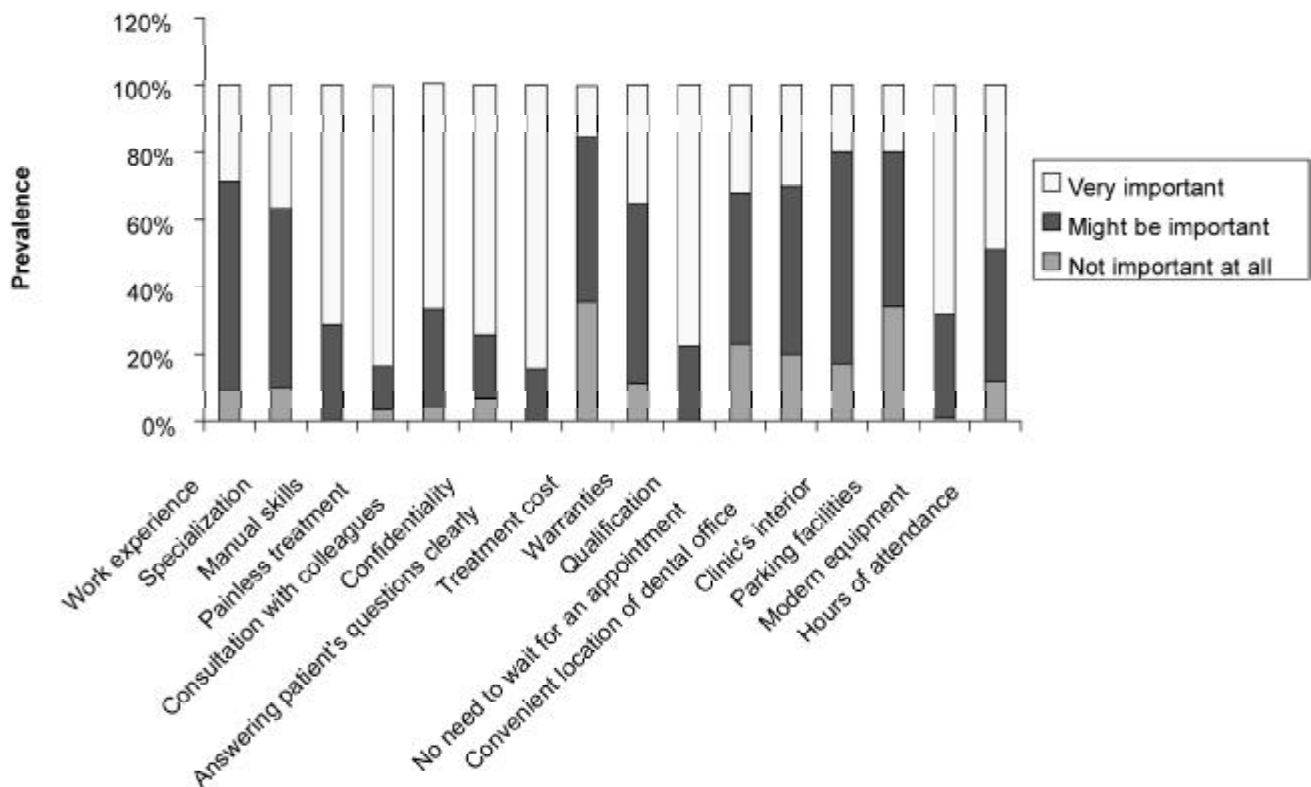


Fig. 2. MMP2 in cells of subepithelial connective tissue (MMP2 IMH, X 250)

It was also observed that excellent knowledge of dental science was more important for respondents, who live in major cities or district's centres ( $\chi^2=16.442$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=0.012$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**DISCUSSION**

Given that the response rate was 64.3% and no data are available about non-respondents, general-

izations from this study should be done with some caution.

The present study showed that the majority of dentists (87%) emphasize the importance of behavior during painful and unpleasant procedures, pain management, which are substantial for a reliable dentist. According to A. Purienė et al [12], causing pain is known to be one of the major stressors not only for patients, but also for the dentists themselves. Therefore, many elderly patients and dentists, who still remember poor pain management problems of soviet dental service, common allergic reactions to widely used local anesthetic novocaine [13], which made dental work stressful and hard, emphasize the importance of painless treatment, which is an essential quality for a reliable dentist. However, these findings differ from many previous studies, which tend to concentrate on dentist's personality attributes rather than on pain management. For example, in a study conducted by G. Chakraborty et al [14], communicative, able to help patient overcome dental fear, emphatic

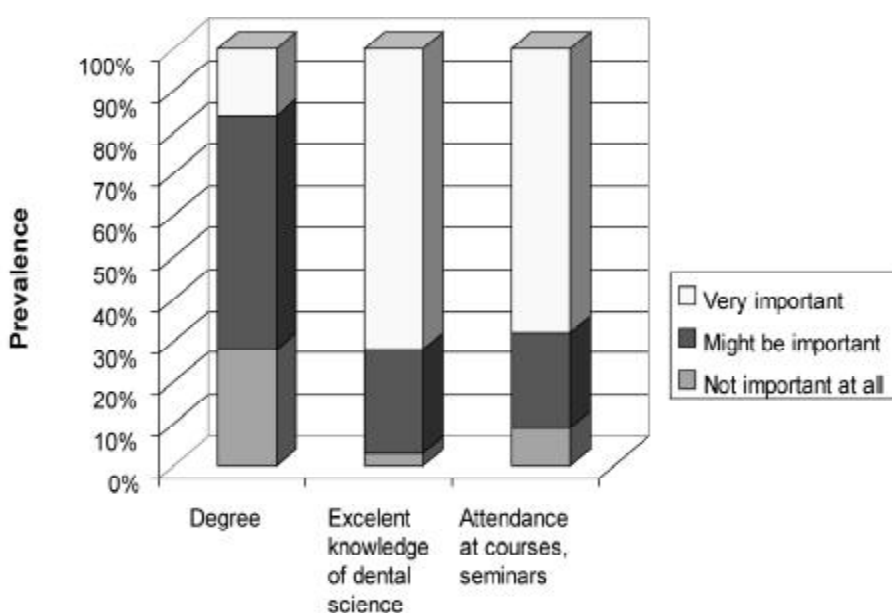


Fig. 3. The distribution of importance according to dentist's scientific attributes

dentists were preferred.

In our study informativeness and qualification were the top dentist's work attributes, which were substantial for 84% and 78% of respondents. These findings correspond to the dental literature. For example, according to S. Lahti et al [15], dentists often did not give information about preventive procedures, did not ask if the patient wanted local anesthesia, did not ask about the special problems of the patient, did not ask, how the patient felt. This resulted in unfulfilled patients' expectations and greatly affected dentist's reliability. Informativeness was found to be a reliable dentist's core quality not only for many patients worldwide, but also for respondents as well: this quality was very important for 84% of dentists, 16% of them replied it might be important and none of them thought that information – giving is not important at all (Fig. 2.).

Dentist's communication skills, empathy, erudition, self confidence in our study were reported to be very important for the majority of respondents (82%, 74%, 77%, 75% respectively). This corresponds to the view, observed in dental literature [4,7], that these are attributes upon which patients are fully capable of passing judgment and are consistently reported as being among the most important traits a reliable dentist should possess.

In our study respondents ( $\geq 30$  years old), and work experienced practitioners ( $\geq 20$  years of work experience) were observed to value various dentist's qualities, such as specialization, low treatment cost, neat clinic's interior, parking facilities etc, more than their younger colleagues. So increasing age and work experience had significant impact on high demands for a reliable dentist (Table). This finding reminds a very similar phenomenon observed in previous studies [16]. Various dentist's attributes were valued more by experienced practitioners than younger ones.

The present study showed that dentist's gender appeared to be the least important quality for even 80% of respondents (Fig. 1.). Only 16% of them thought that dentist's gender might have been important and only for 4% it was very important. However, according to J. Timothy et al [17], gender did matter for patients when choosing a reliable dentist. Men were generally perceived as more competent than women. Women were more likely to be chosen

as the most caring dentists. This finding reveals the fact that odontology in Eastern European countries, as well as in the majority of eastern European countries, also Finland, has always been considered to be a feminine profession, and patients equally choose to be treated by both male and female dentists.

72% of respondents emphasized the importance of excellent knowledge of dental science, which was noticed to be more essential than dentist's degree (16%) or attendance at courses or seminars (68%) (Fig. 3.). To add, this finding reminds the fact, already observed in previous studies, that professional competence is one of the core qualities a reliable dentist should possess [18].

Although modern equipment was reported to be essential for 68% of respondents, convenience – oriented attributes, such as parking facilities, hours of attendance, neat clinics interior, convenient location of dental office, no need to wait for an appointment, were not accentuated (Fig. 2.). However according to previous studies [19], private practitioners were found to emphasize the importance of dental office's interior, which was observed to be essential not only for patients but also for the dentists themselves. "Warmth" and "competency" were images dentists most wanted to communicate to the patient community.

Lithuanian dentists emphasizing pain management, behavior during painful and unpleasant procedures, communication skills, erudition, self-confidence, excellent knowledge of dental science briefly defined a reliable dentist's concept. How a dentist feels about himself as a dentist, how he perceives dental job and what goals sets for himself is critical and fundamental how the practice performs. Findings of this study show the issues in dental profession needing attention to increase dentist's reliability, which will make treatment process easier and more effective.

## CONCLUSIONS

The most important qualities for a "reliable dentist", according to Lithuanian dentists, are pain management, painless treatment, behavior during painful and unpleasant procedures, communication skills, ability to answer patient's questions clearly and understanding patients' expectations.

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