

Masters in Public Health as Career Option: Perception of Dental Interns and Residents in Gujarat

**Dr. Anjali Navadiya¹, Dr. Vidhi Kevadiya², Dr. Hetvi Parmar³, Dr. Vivek Kher⁴,
Dr. Chaitanya Parmar⁵, Dr. Mandeep Singh Gohil⁶**

^{1,2} Tutor at College of Dental Science and Hospital, Amargadh, Gujarat, India.

^{3,4,5} Dental Intern at College of Dental Science and Hospital, Amargadh, Gujarat, India.

⁶ Reader and Guide from Department of Public Health Dentistry at College of Dental Science and Hospital, Amargadh, Gujarat, India.

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Abstract: Background: Public health is gaining importance in India with increasing emphasis on preventive and community-based healthcare. However, the awareness and inclination of dental professionals toward pursuing a Master's in Public Health (MPH) remain uncertain. Understanding dental interns' and residents' perceptions can guide curriculum development and career counselling. **Aim:** To evaluate the level of awareness among dental interns and residents in Gujarat regarding the scope and opportunities of pursuing public health as a career option. **Materials and Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey was conducted among 384 dental interns and postgraduate residents from various dental colleges across Gujarat. A pre-tested, self-administered Google Form consisting of closed-ended questions assessed participants' awareness, attitudes, and perceived barriers toward an MPH degree. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) and inferential analysis (Chi-square test) to compare responses between interns and residents. **Results:** The findings revealed that overall awareness regarding the MPH program and its career opportunities was low among participants. While most respondents recognized the role of public health in improving community well-being, only a small proportion expressed interest in pursuing an MPH after BDS. Significant differences were observed between interns and residents in their awareness levels ($p < 0.05$). Limited information, lack of guidance, and uncertainty about career prospects were the most cited barriers. **Conclusion:** The study highlights a gap in awareness about public health as a potential career path among dental professionals in Gujarat. Incorporating public health orientation and structured counselling sessions in the dental curriculum could help bridge this gap and encourage interdisciplinary participation in community health initiatives.

Key Words: Public health, Masters in Public Health, Dental interns, Dental residents, Career perception, Awareness, Gujarat.

1. Introduction

All determinants of health must be addressed via a strategy for public health that involves inter-disciplinary coordination and multisectoral collaboration. By creating and using information that prevents illness, shields the public from damage, and advances health in the state, the country, and the world, public health aims to improve human health.^[1]

The public health workforce has received little attention. Institutions or universities that offer public health programs or

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Masters of Public Health programs must take creative steps to ensure that public health students or MPH graduates are effective and qualified to handle current and potential public health challenges as they attempt to address the concerns of workforce quantity and quality in public health.^[1]

Healthcare professionals, especially dentists, have recently placed a strong emphasis on strengthening public health. As a result, in contemporary times, dentistry has been regarded as one of the sought-after occupations.^[2]

After graduation, a dental surgeon has the choice between continuing education and clinical practice. For a minimum of three years, postgraduate master's training (Master of Dental Surgery) is provided in India for any specialization. There are numerous variables that impact the decision to pursue a postgraduate specialty.^[2]

One of the initial attempts to map the current state of public health education offered as a Master's program in India was this exercise. Such comparison research was not feasible. Even though there are many spots available for Master of Public Health programs, very few students decide on enrolling in them.^[3]

Opportunities for employment are found in every aspect of industries, universities, research institutes, labs, government offices, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the fields of development, energy, public health, safety and wellness at work, and the environment.^[3]

Both medical graduates and graduates of allied health fields are qualified to enroll in the Master of Public Health (MPH) programs that have recently been introduced by a number of Indian universities. In order to develop interdisciplinary teams of public health experts throughout the nation, there is a deliberate attempt to make public health education accessible for non-medical professionals. Career prospects for MPH graduates are yet undetermined, nevertheless.^[4]

The following abilities will be developed in the applicant by the course:

- Analytical and evaluation abilities for gathering and analysing data Policy planning and development abilities for addressing public health issues.
- Communication abilities for public health data and information distribution and advocacy.
- Expertise in financial management and strategy is essential for managing public health initiatives nationwide.
- Competency in leadership is necessary for public health managers.^[5]

According to one research, doctors pursuing MPHs aim to migrate away from clinical medicine and toward switching careers, skill enhancement, and professional development in order to support responsive and equitable health systems. Physicians were exposed to population perspectives on health and sickness during the training, which affected their daily decisions and work practices. In order to ensure that training institutions agree on essential abilities as well as that graduates are qualified to fulfill population health demands, the MPH might impose benchmarking to verify competency.^[6]

Numerous studies have found that most of students pursuing dental training have medicine as their preferred career, instead of dentistry. This may imply that the majority of students only end up in dental training because they are struggling to secure the grades necessary to be admitted in the more competitive medical program.^[7]

Choosing a branch becomes even more difficult, particularly if one is pursuing a career in a field that is still in its early stages and expanding, like public health dentistry. Students show little interest in the topic over graduation because of the tendency to teach and train using a therapeutic strategy as opposed to a preventative or promotional one.^[8]

Economic factors and career stability were the main reasons why students selected dentistry. They anticipate completing specialized training and achieving both immediate and long-term financial security. In order to maximize the delivery of a balanced and widely accessible oral health service nationwide and to hire more motivated dentists in all sectors, it is advised that students receive sufficient counselling, training, and guidance regarding possible career paths beginning in the early years during school.^[9]

2. Review of Literature

1. Hassan S. Halawany* 2014^[10]

- This study intended to ascertain Saudi dental students selected postgraduate specialty, career motives, and outlooks on the field's future. Dental students at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia in their first through fifth years were given a pretested, self-administered questionnaire consisting of sixteen items. The level of significance was fixed at 5%, and descriptive statistics were computed.
- Based to the study's limitations, the majority of Saudi dental students' career motivations appeared to be linked to the socioeconomic expectations of dentistry, while their views on the field's future appeared to be linked to the necessity of postgraduate training.

2. Ritika Tiwari et al, 2018*^[11]

- The number of MPH programs available in India has increased significantly during the last 20 years. There is currently a greater demand for public health graduates than there is supply. There is no clearly defined career path for MPH graduates in the nation's public health infrastructure, despite the acknowledged need to bolster the public health workforce in India.
- The range of the instructor to student enrolment ratio was 1:0.1 to 1:42. Only 704 students were enrolled in the 1190 spots available for MPH programs for the 2016–2017 academic year. MPH programs are currently undersubscribed, despite the urgent need to bolster India's public health workforce. At the moment, enrolled MPH students aren't instructed in accordance with a clearly defined, standardized competence framework that is appropriate for the Indian setting. Institutions would be

better able to modify their programs and guarantee that graduates have the necessary skill sets if there was more clarity on the function of MPH graduates in India's public health infrastructure.

3. Shalini Singh et al, 2024 ^{*[12]}

- The purpose of this study is to help the public health officers and clinicians transmit to administrative posts by improving their management and leadership abilities.
- The responses, learning outcomes, and behaviour change of the participants were assessed using Kirkpatrick's model. Descriptive statistics were used to examine feedback in 12 training areas, and paired t-tests in Stata 18 were used to compare test results before and after training in order to gauge learning gains. Interviews with participants yielded more information.
- A moderate improvement in learning outcomes was demonstrated by the average test scores, which increased from 53.3 to 59.6 ($p = 0.003$). They devised action plans for public health issues and effectively used a structure for problem-solving in practicum assignments.

3. Materials And Methods

A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted among dental interns and postgraduate residents enrolled in various dental colleges across Gujarat. The study aimed to assess their awareness, perception, and inclination toward pursuing a Master's in Public Health (MPH) as a potential career option.

The study included a total of **384 participants**, comprising dental interns and residents from both government and private dental institutions across Gujarat. Data were collected using a **self-administered, pre-validated structured questionnaire** developed on Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections:

1. **Demographic details** – including age, gender, academic level.
2. **Awareness and perception** – assessing knowledge about MPH programs, eligibility, duration, curriculum, and career opportunities.
3. **Attitude and barriers** – evaluating interest in pursuing MPH and identifying perceived challenges and motivations.

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts for content validity, and a pilot test was conducted on 30 participants to ensure clarity and reliability. The pilot responses were excluded from the final dataset.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the respective participating institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they proceeded to the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity of responses were strictly maintained.

The collected data were compiled in Microsoft Excel and analysed. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were used to summarize the data. The Chi-square test was applied to compare awareness and perception between dental interns and residents. A p -value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

4. Results

A total of 384 dental interns and postgraduate residents from various dental colleges across Gujarat participated in the study as shown in the chart-1. The response rate was satisfactory, and all submitted questionnaires were complete and valid for analysis. The participants represented both government and private institutions.

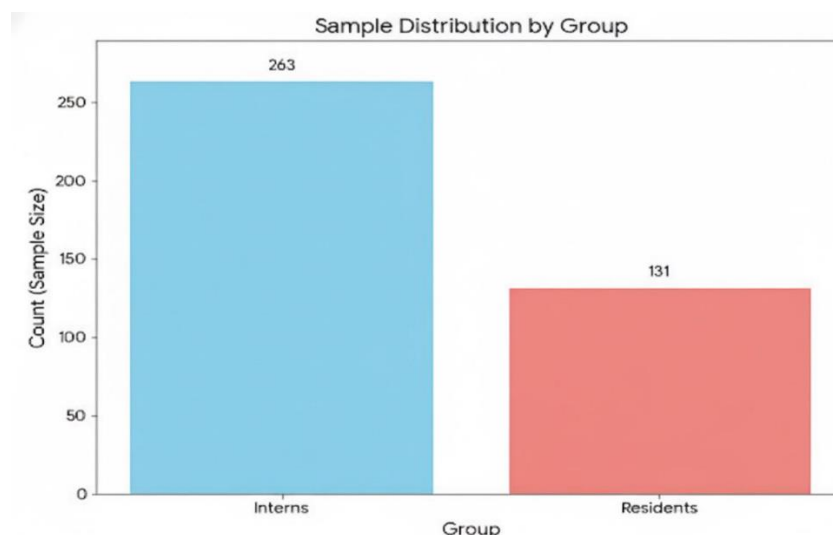


Chart 1

Participants were asked about their reason for joining the dental profession. Most respondents reported joining by choice, while others mentioned reasons such as financial stability, respect in the community, and long-term career security. This reflects the diversity in motivation among dental professionals toward their career selection. Chart – 2

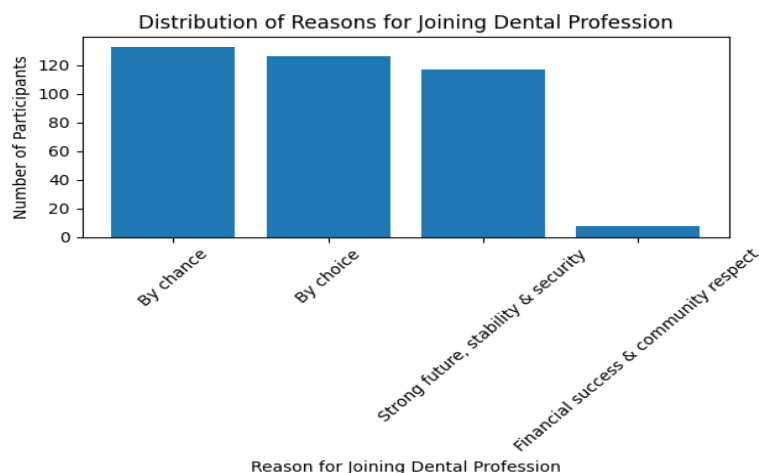


Chart 2

When asked about their plans to work for the community, a majority of respondents showed a positive inclination toward community-based service, indicating an awareness of social responsibility within the dental profession. Chart-3

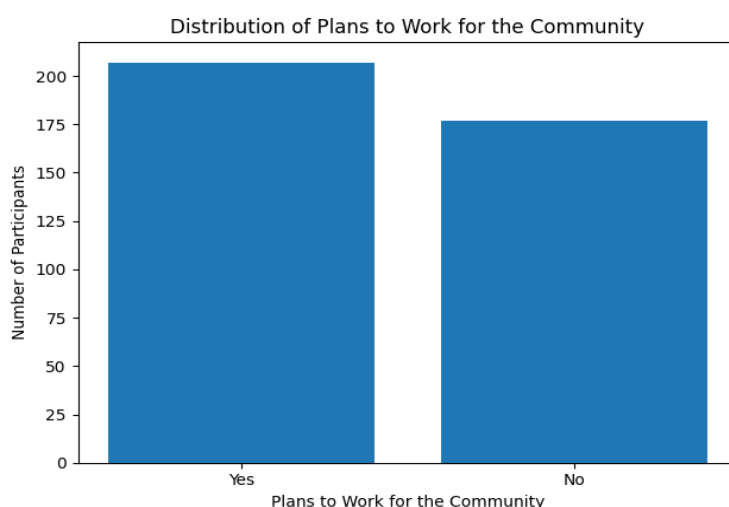


Chart 3

Responses regarding the subject of Public Health Dentistry revealed that many participants found it interesting or good, while a smaller proportion considered it boring. This suggests a generally favorable attitude toward the discipline among dental interns and residents. Chart -4

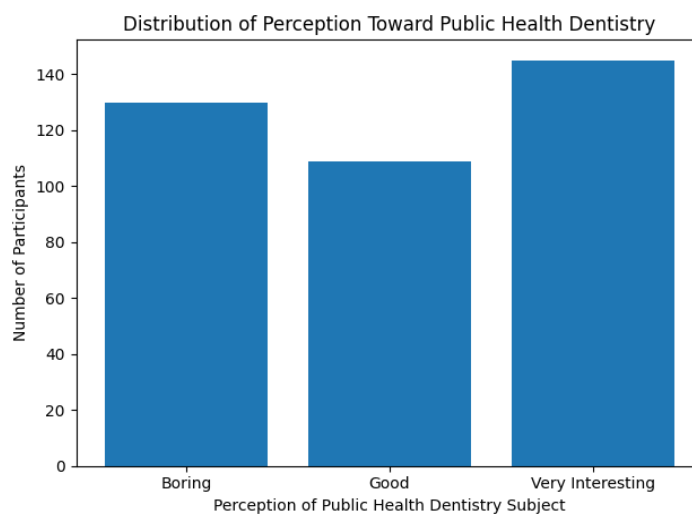


Chart 4

Masters in Public Health as Career Option: Perception of Dental Interns and Residents in Gujarat

A significant portion of participants were aware of the MPH program, indicating growing familiarity with non-clinical career options in dentistry. However, a few respondents still lacked awareness, highlighting the need for better academic guidance and exposure. Chart-5

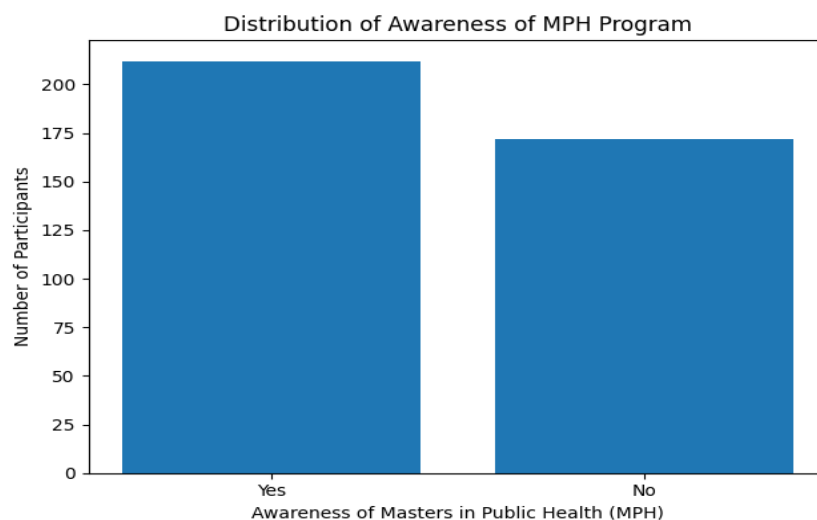


Chart 5

Participants learned about MPH programs through various sources, including college faculty, friends, social media, and colleagues. This suggests that both institutional and peer-driven channels play a role in spreading awareness about the MPH program. Chart-6

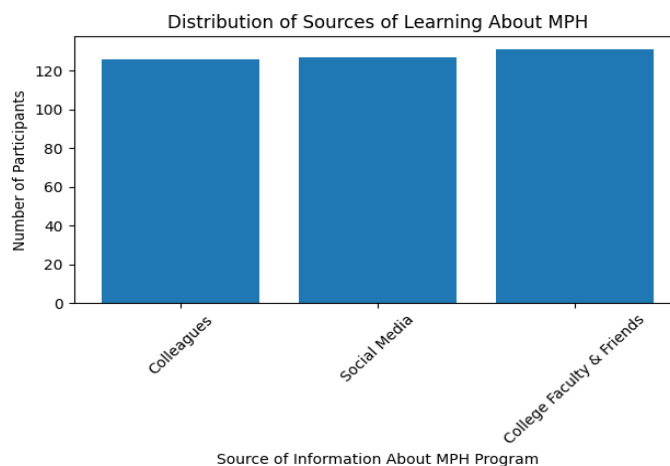


Chart 6

Consideration of MPH as Career Option

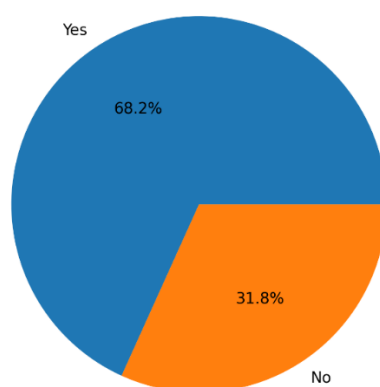


Chart-7

Masters in Public Health as Career Option: Perception of Dental Interns and Residents in Gujarat

When asked whether they were considering MPH as a future career option, many respondents showed interest, indicating an increasing acceptance of public health as an alternative or complementary field to clinical dentistry. Chart-7

Regarding the preferred location for pursuing MPH, participants expressed varied choices between India and abroad. The inclination toward international institutions may reflect perceived quality, exposure, and global opportunities associated with foreign MPH programs. Chart-8

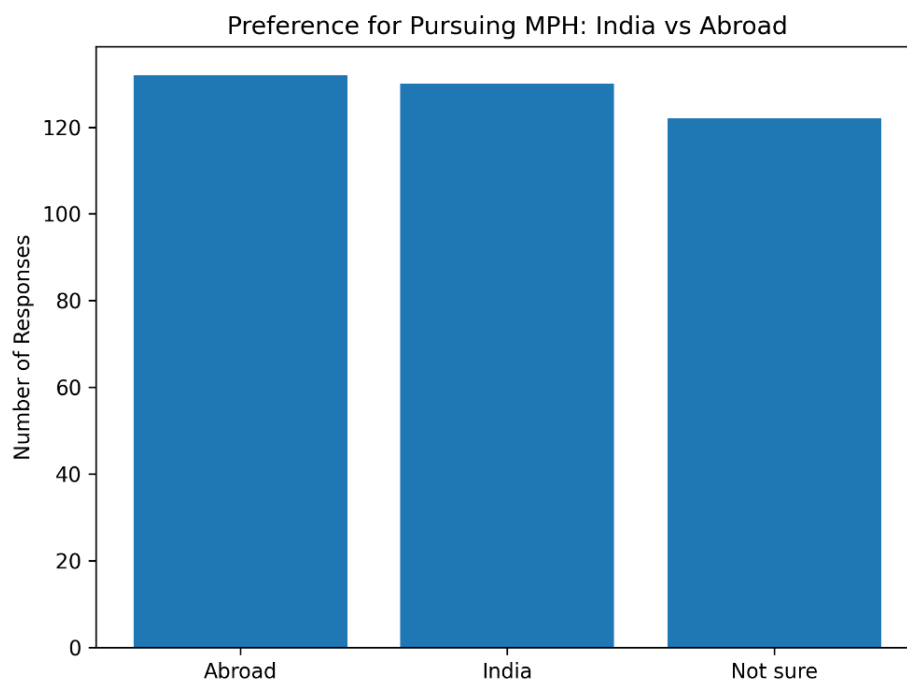


Chart 8

Most participants believed that an MPH from abroad offers better value, while others considered both equally valuable or were unsure. This perception highlights the influence of institutional reputation and global recognition on decision-making. Chart-9

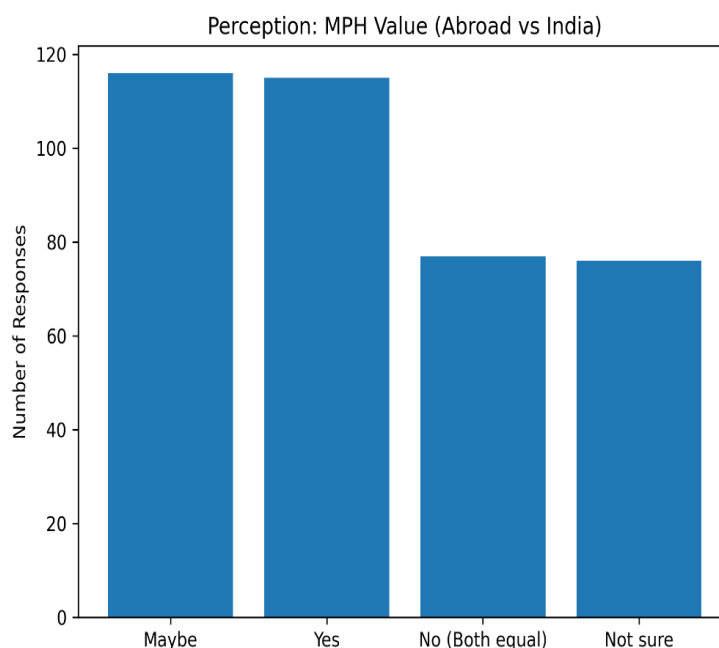


Chart 9

Respondents were motivated by several factors, including interest in community service, broader career opportunities, financial growth, international prospects, and better work-life balance. This shows a multifaceted motivation among dental graduates toward public health education. Chart-10

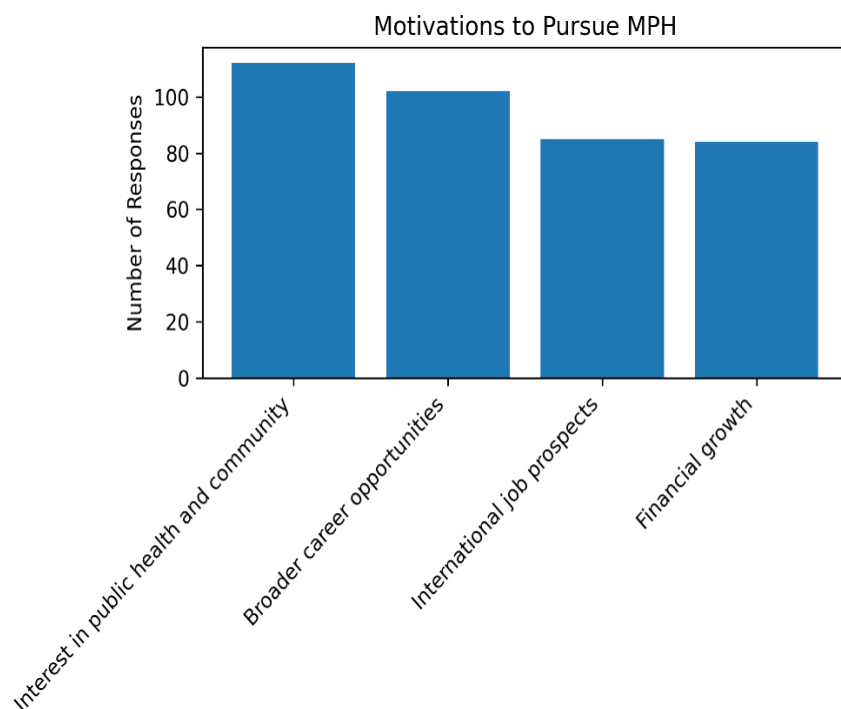


Chart 10

A majority of participants agreed that an MPH degree can enhance a dentist's career, suggesting that the program is viewed as a valuable addition to professional growth and diversification of roles. Chart-11

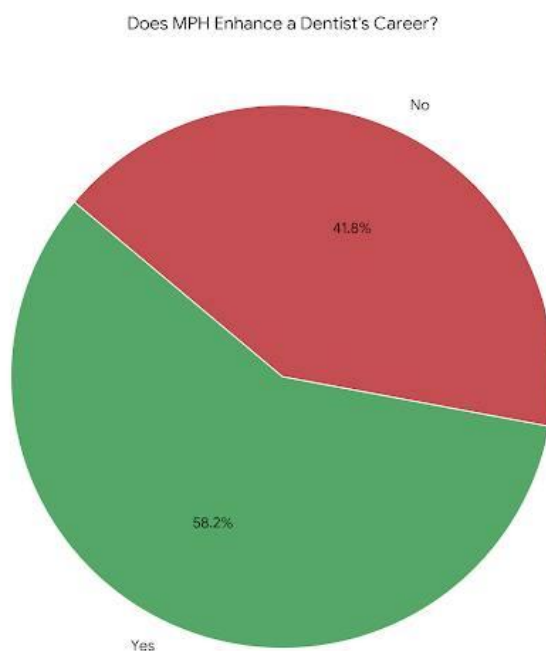


Chart 11

Participants identified factors such as lack of awareness, cost of the program, preference for clinical practice, and uncertainty about job prospects as barriers. Addressing these factors could encourage more dental professionals to consider public health careers. Chart -12

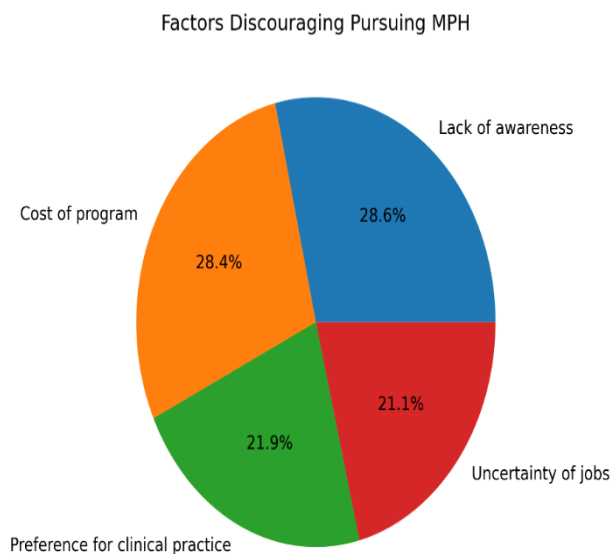


Chart 12

Most respondents believed MPH graduates primarily work in government health departments, NGOs, research institutions, international organizations, or private hospitals. This awareness reflects an understanding of the wide employment scope of public health professionals. Chart-

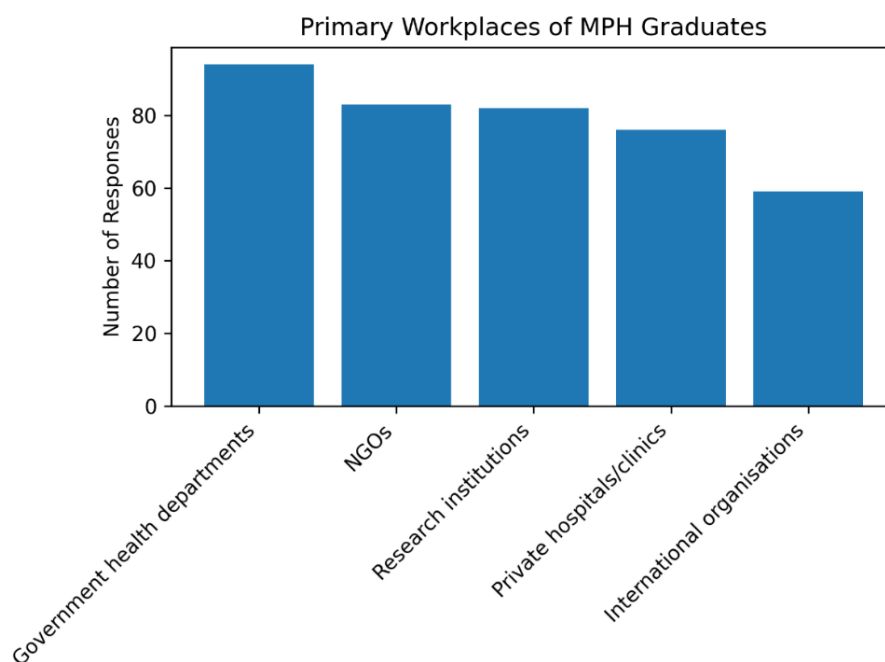


Chart 13

Respondents cited diverse career opportunities, chances of working abroad, better work-life balance, and non-clinical job roles as key advantages of MPH compared to MDS. However, some participants still viewed MDS as a better option, indicating differing professional preferences. Chart-14

When asked whether an MPH could provide better career stability than clinical dentistry, opinions were mixed. While many agreed, others were uncertain, reflecting varying levels of confidence regarding long-term job security in the public health field. Chart-15

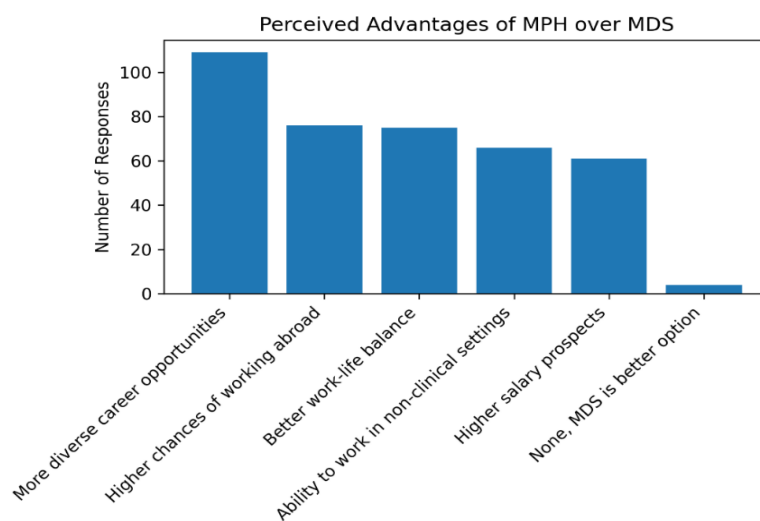


Chart 14

Does MPH Provide Better Career Stability Than Clinical Dentistry?

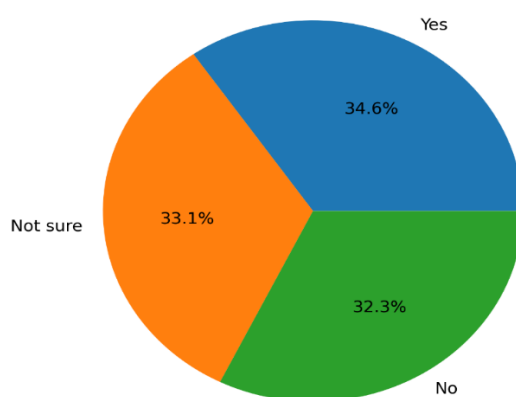


Chart 15

Among the preferred career pathways, participants showed interest in health policy and administration, epidemiology and research, international health organizations, community health programs, and academia. This variety demonstrates the multidisciplinary appeal of MPH programs among dental professionals. Chart-16

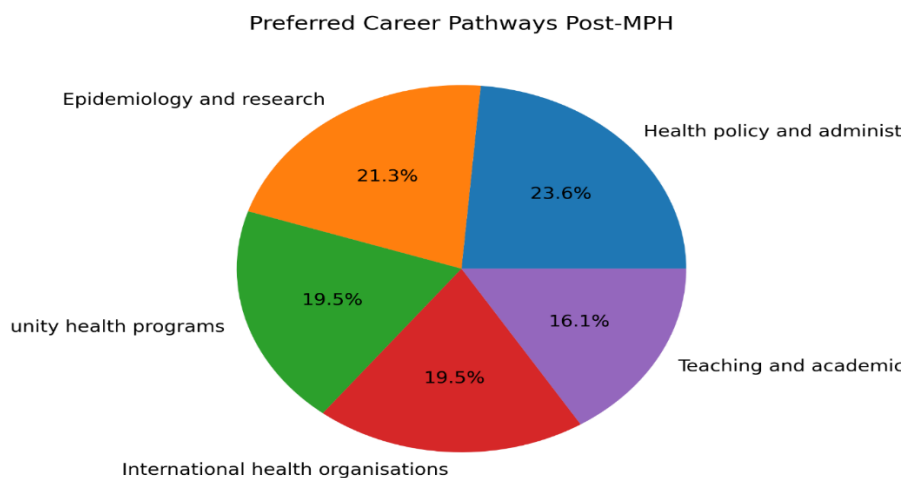


Chart 16

Variable	Response Category	Interns (n = 252)	Residents (n = 132)	χ^2 value	p-value	Inference
Awareness about MPH	Yes	38.8% (149)	16% (63)	10.52	0.003*	Significant
	No	26.8% (103)	17.9% (69)			
Interest in pursuing MPH after BDS	Yes	21.3% (82)	10.4% (40)	100.1	0.004*	Significant
	No	44.2% (170)	23.9% (92)			

Table 1. Comparison of awareness and perception regarding Masters in Public Health (MPH) among dental interns and residents

*p < 0.05 statistically significant.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to evaluate the awareness and perception of dental interns and residents in Gujarat regarding Masters in Public Health (MPH) as a career option. The findings indicate that although participants demonstrated a positive attitude toward community service and public health dentistry, overall awareness about the MPH program and its scope remained comparatively low.

A majority of participants reported joining the dental profession by choice or due to perceived professional stability and societal respect. This reflects a career inclination primarily oriented toward clinical practice and financial security. While many respondents expressed willingness to work for the community, this interest did not necessarily translate into awareness of structured public health career pathways such as MPH. This gap suggests that community orientation during undergraduate training may not be sufficiently linked to broader public health career exposure.

Despite limited awareness, a considerable proportion of respondents perceived public health dentistry as “good” or “very interesting.” This positive perception indicates that students are receptive to preventive and community-based approaches but may lack adequate guidance regarding advanced academic pathways in public health. Similar trends have been observed in healthcare education, where students acknowledge the importance of public health but remain unfamiliar with specialized postgraduate options.

The study revealed that residents exhibited significantly higher awareness and interest in pursuing MPH compared to interns. This difference may be attributed to increased academic exposure, research involvement, and professional maturity among residents. Clinical experience and greater interaction with healthcare systems during postgraduate training may enhance awareness about interdisciplinary and non-clinical career opportunities.

Motivating factors for pursuing MPH included interest in community service, broader career prospects, international job opportunities, and improved work-life balance. These findings suggest that participants recognize the expanding scope of public health careers beyond traditional clinical roles. However, discouraging factors such as lack of awareness, high program costs, preference for clinical practice, and uncertainty regarding job prospects were commonly reported. These barriers highlight the need for structured career counselling and clearer dissemination of information regarding employment opportunities for MPH graduates.

A notable observation was the perception that MPH programs abroad hold greater value compared to those in India. This reflects a common belief among healthcare graduates that international degrees provide better exposure and career mobility. However, such perceptions may stem from insufficient awareness about the growing public health infrastructure and policy opportunities within India.

Participants identified government health departments, NGOs, research institutions, and international organizations as primary employment sectors for MPH graduates. The preference for epidemiology, research, and health policy indicates growing interest in analytical and administrative roles within healthcare systems. These findings align with the increasing global emphasis on preventive healthcare, health systems strengthening, and policy development.

Overall, the results highlight a disconnect between interest in community service and awareness of formal public health career pathways. Integrating structured orientation programs, seminars, workshops, and mentorship regarding MPH during undergraduate and internship phases may help bridge this gap. Strengthening public health exposure within the dental curriculum could encourage interdisciplinary career exploration and support workforce diversification.

6. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that awareness regarding Masters in Public Health (MPH) as a career option among dental interns and residents in Gujarat is relatively low, despite a generally positive attitude toward community health and preventive dentistry. Residents showed higher awareness and more favourable perceptions compared to interns; however, both groups reported limited guidance and uncertainty about career prospects.

Motivational factors such as broader career opportunities and international exposure were counterbalanced by barriers including lack of awareness, financial concerns, and preference for clinical practice. These findings emphasize the need for

enhanced academic orientation, structured career counselling, and improved dissemination of information regarding public health opportunities within the dental curriculum.

Promoting awareness of MPH programs may encourage dental professionals to participate more actively in community health initiatives, health policy development, and research, thereby contributing to the strengthening of the public health workforce in India.

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