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A Profession by Choice, Not by Necessity: What Factors Influence Dentists' Career Decisions – A Preliminary Report

Zawód z wyboru, nie z przymusu: jakie czynniki kierują decyzjami lekarzy dentystów – doniesienie wstępne

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ABSTRACT

The choice of the dental profession is a multifactorial process influenced by individual, economic, and systemic determinants. A survey conducted among 27 dentists from the Greater Poland region showed that the most important motivational factor was job stability, followed by financial satisfaction and the desire to help others. Professional development opportunities and job security were also of significant importance. The obtained results indicate a predominance of pragmatic factors in Poland, which may be related to the high share of the private sector and the specific characteristics of dental education.

Keywords: dentist, motivation, career choice, job satisfaction.

STRESZCZENIE

Wybór zawodu lekarza dentysty jest procesem wieloczynnikowym, zależnym od uwarunkowań indywidualnych, ekonomicznych i systemowych. Przeprowadzone badanie ankietowe wśród 27 lekarzy dentystów z województwa wielkopolskiego wykazało, że najważniejszym czynnikiem motywacyjnym była stabilność zawodowa, a następnie satysfakcja finansowa oraz chęć pomocy innym. Istotne znaczenie miały również możliwości rozwoju zawodowego i bezpieczeństwo zatrudnienia. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na dominację czynników pragmatycznych w Polsce, co może być związane z dużym udziałem sektora prywatnego oraz specyfiką kształcenia.

Słowa kluczowe: lekarz dentysta, motywacja, wybór zawodu, satysfakcja zawodowa.

Introduction

In the analysis of motivational factors influencing the choice of a dental career, many authors emphasize the multifactorial nature of professional decision-making. In a 2009 study, Gallagher et al. [1] demonstrated that decisions regarding a dental career are shaped by a combination of personal,

professional, and organizational factors, including expectations related to quality of life, the nature of work, and opportunities for professional development. The importance of work-life balance was also highlighted, as it constituted a key element influencing future career planning for many respondents [1].

A slightly different perspective was presented in studies from the United Kingdom, which showed that long-term determinants of career choice focus on opportunities for professional development, as well as personal aspects such as work–life balance and income level [2]. Gallagher and Wilson emphasized that planning the dental workforce should take into account changing societal health needs, the development of team-based work, and new models of dental care organization, all of which may influence the structure and functioning of the dental labor market [2].

However, it should be noted that the results of the aforementioned studies cannot be directly compared with findings from other dental settings, particularly those in Poland. This is due to differences in educational systems: in the UK, dentists are trained within a different professional framework, whereas in Poland dentistry is practiced as a distinct medical profession under the title of “physician–dentist,” which limits direct comparability.

The aim of this study was to determine whether dentists in Poland differ in terms of motivational factors from dentists practicing in the United Kingdom.

Material and Methods

The study was conducted using an original questionnaire developed for the purposes of the research project, which received approval from the University Bioethics Committee of the Collegium Medicum at Nicolaus Copernicus University (No. 13/2025). The survey was distributed among dentists working in the Greater Poland Voivodeship, resulting in 27 correctly completed questionnaires.

Results

The dental profession in Poland is highly feminized. The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents were women (21 dentists). Most respondents lived in urban areas, as reflected in **Table 1**, with 16 dentists residing in cities with populations above 100,000 inhabitants. The vast majority (25 respondents) were financially independent.

According to data from the Central Statistical Office, women accounted for 76.1% of dentists in Poland in 2024, confirming the strong and persistent feminization of the profession [3], which is also reflected in the study group.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the study population of dentists

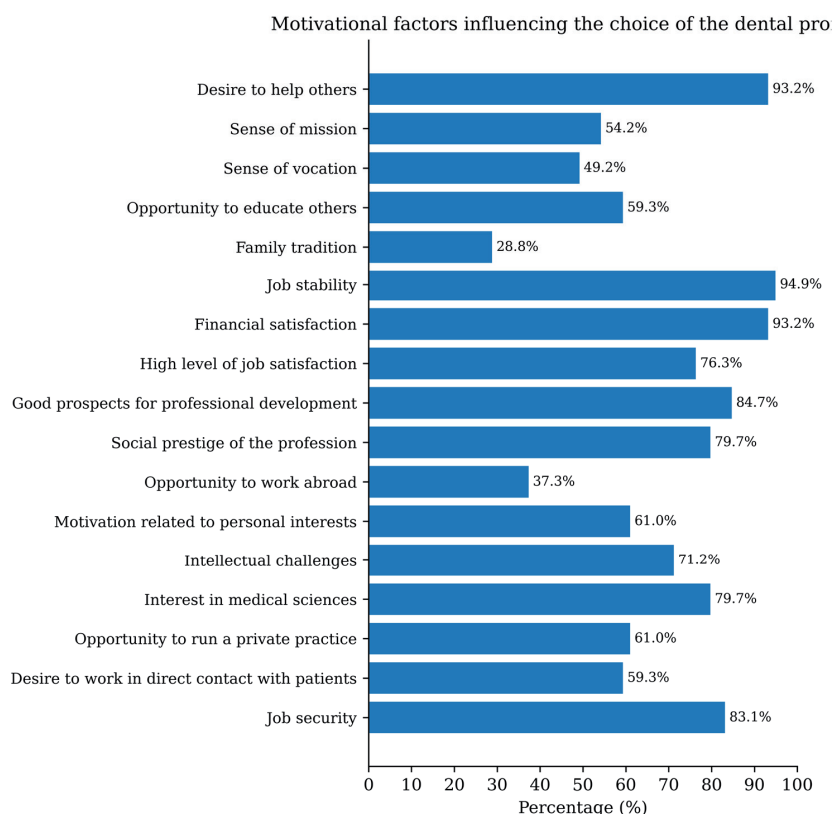
Tabela 1. Charakterystyka socjodemograficzna badanej grupy lekarzy dentystów

Variables	N
Gender	27
Female	21
Male	6
Mean age	34
Place of residence	
City with more than 300,000 inhabitants	6
City with 100,000–300,000 inhabitants	10
City with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants	4
Rural area	7
Financial situation of the respondent	
Financially independent	25
Partially financially dependent on others	2

The results indicate that the majority of dentists rated job stability as the most important motivational factor (**Figure 1**) when choosing their profession (94.9%). Such a high level of this determinant may reflect the specific nature of practicing dentistry in Poland, where the profession is perceived as providing security and the opportunity to run a private practice.

Other highly ranked determinants included financial satisfaction and the desire to help others (both 93.2%). This may reflect the conditions of practicing the profession, including the large share of the private sector in dentistry and the associated economic aspects. The desire to help others confirms the significant role of altruistic motivation in career choice.

Subsequent motivational factors included good prospects for professional development (84.7%) and job security (83.1%). These findings highlight the importance of professional growth opportunities, which may influence long-term job satisfaction. Other motivational factors did not exceed 80%.

Figure 1. Motivational factors influencing the choice of the dental profession**Figure 1.** Zestawienie czynników motywacyjnych wpływających na wybór zawodu dentysty

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that dentists in Poland emphasize different motivational factors compared to dentists in the United Kingdom. In Poland, job stability was rated as the most important factor influencing career choice, followed by financial satisfaction. This may reflect the conditions of practicing dentistry, particularly the larger role of the private sector and its economic implications.

In contrast, dentists in the United Kingdom tend to emphasize factors more closely related to the nature of the work, such as working with patients, helping others, professional fulfillment, as well as opportunities for development and professional prestige [4, 5].

In interpreting these findings, it is important to consider differences in educational and professional systems. In Poland, the dentist is a distinct medical profession with a separate education system focused on clinical practice from the early stages. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, although dentistry is also a distinct profession, it is more strongly embedded in a healthcare system dominated by public funding through the NHS. These systemic differences may influence how the professional role is perceived.

The practical nature of dental education in Poland, characterized by a high proportion of clinical training and early exposure to patient care [6], may contribute to a more pragmatic approach to the profession, including greater emphasis on job stability and financial aspects. Additionally, the high share of private dental services reinforces the importance of economic factors in career decision-making.

Newton et al. [7] highlighted that external factors, such as work organization, employment models, working hours, and flexibility, significantly influence career planning among dentists.

A 2018 survey [8] indicated that higher levels of job satisfaction were observed among younger dentists working in the private sector, particularly in large cities. Women reported higher job satisfaction than men, and external systemic conditions did not significantly affect satisfaction levels.

These findings suggest that while economic and pragmatic factors play an important role in choosing a profession, they are not the sole determinants of long-term job satisfaction. Research indicates that satisfaction among dentists is strongly associated with internal and organizational factors, such as the ability to utilize one's competencies.

cies, professional autonomy, and the nature of the work [9].

The work environment also plays a crucial role, including relationships with patients and colleagues, as well as overall work organization. Review studies indicate that key factors enhancing job satisfaction include interpersonal relationships, professional respect, working conditions, and opportunities for development and continuing education [10]. Moreover, dentists working in the private sector often report higher levels of job satisfaction, which is associated with greater autonomy, better working conditions, and a more favorable professional environment.

A longitudinal study spanning 10 years [11] found that approximately 69% of dentists reported overall career satisfaction; however, only a small proportion indicated that their career choice was directly driven by an initial passion for dentistry. At the same time, more than half of respondents considered changing career paths or were uncertain about continuing in the profession. The authors emphasized that job satisfaction was influenced by factors such as postgraduate education, work environment, and opportunities for professional development. These findings suggest that career trajectories in dentistry may evolve significantly over time, and satisfaction depends on a range of organizational and developmental factors [11].

Conclusion

The findings indicate that job satisfaction among dentists is a multifactorial phenomenon. While economic factors may determine the initial choice of profession, long-term satisfaction largely depends on the quality of the work environment, the organization of the healthcare system, and opportunities for professional development and the fulfillment of career aspirations.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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