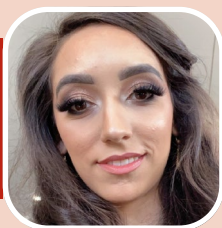


# Ethnicity and working within dentistry



By dental therapist and reader panel member **Laura Hinds**

**I**s your dentist white or in an ethnic minority? Does this make a difference to the treatment patients receive? The list of papers such as *Ethical considerations in dentistry* and *Common ethical problems and dilemmas* is long, but why is it so hard to find any research relating to being of an ethnic minority background and working within the dental profession?

## Statistics

In the UK, out of a population of 66,796,800,<sup>1</sup> 'The Ethnic Minority (GB) group includes all ethnic groups other than White British.'<sup>2</sup>

'Ethnic minority patients are significantly less likely to get an NHS dental appointment when they want one, Government research has found.'<sup>3</sup> Although it is very difficult to obtain data on anything similar for dental care professionals/dentists, this article does highlight that patients of an ethnic background (ethnic being defined as anyone who does not identify as White British) are also having trouble in gaining access to a dentist – this leads to the assumption that perhaps it is just ethnic minority groups who

are affected by their race when it comes to dental care/profession. Where then does this leave dental surgeries in upholding the GDC standards, standard 1: 'Put Patients' Interests First'<sup>4</sup>

'Dentistry, like other healthcare professions, has struggled with the historical legacy of being conceptualised as a "white" profession.'<sup>6</sup> This statement is very bold in that it suggests that due to the apparent prestige of the profession as a whole, it is therefore limited to those who are of a similar demographic, perhaps putting off ethnic minority students from applying. Is this so true now? Or could this simply be because the majority of the European population, including the United Kingdom, are white?<sup>6</sup>

Data collected by the Dental Schools Council demonstrate however, that there is a slightly more diverse range of ethnicities at a junior level<sup>7</sup> (within a clinical teaching role), which shows that perhaps the 'old school' thinking is slowly disappearing and making way for a younger generation, regardless of background within the profession. Despite the fact that 72.6% identified as white,<sup>7</sup> this is a positive shift for those from an ethnic

minority background wanting to establish themselves within the dental profession.

Without a doubt, especially since the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the summer of 2020, there has been a global emphasis on racism: 'After George Floyd was killed on 25 May in Minneapolis, protests erupted in different countries, and along with countless others, BLM members took to the streets. Demonstrators gathered at London's Hyde Park and marched towards Victoria Station, and others were at Trafalgar Square, kneeling in solidarity. 'Additional demonstrations took place in Berlin, Paris, Dublin, Amsterdam, and of course, the US.'<sup>5</sup>

During a period where many have expressed discontent with their treatment as a result of being a certain race, will this be the same within dentistry, where not just professionals are in a minority, but patients who are in an ethnic minority are also struggling to be cared for?

For the future generations, being ethnic or white, dentists and the dental team are seen as role models<sup>8</sup> for younger followers into the profession. Therefore, it is crucial that as time progresses and ways change and adapt, dentistry adapts to this and encourages and welcomes individuals from all backgrounds. Dentistry is in no way a stranger to change, as shown by the excellent resilience and adaptations demonstrated by the entire profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no excuse not to inspire the younger generation from all ethnicities to embark on a career which so many of us love and adore



doing on a daily basis.

In addition, there are also assumptions that those who work in or apply to study dentistry are from a middle-class demographic.

However, an article by Bedi and Gilthorpe<sup>9</sup> suggests that dentistry accepted a higher percentage of students from a lower social class background [than other degree courses],

COVID-19 highlighted the fact that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups are at high risk of the coronavirus; so will 2021 be the year ethnic minorities are celebrated within dentistry? Or will we see a greater diversity among the younger generation of dental professionals in the UK as time progresses?

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*'There is no excuse not to inspire the younger generation from all ethnicities to embark on a career which so many of us love and adore doing'*

as well as those from black and ethnic minority groups. This is a positive in that it shows hope, along with the reassurance that dentistry is a caring profession putting the needs of others first, enabling career opportunities regardless of background.

### Conclusion

Why then, is it so difficult to find any data corresponding to ethnic backgrounds working in dentistry? Is this because individuals who were born here forget their heritage and choose to be identified as 'White British', or is it simply overlooked by statistics?

2020 highlighted the BLM movement;

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