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Research Article

Monitoring and Managing Pain and Physiological Stress During Dental Procedures: Roles of Dentists, Dental Assistants, and Nurses

Fadwa Monawar Alotaibi[1]*, Saleh Ali Hassan Alyami[2], Alqarni, Abdullah Ali H.[3], Alhilali, Abdulhadi Mohammed S.[4], Duaa Yousef I Nunu[5], Maha Madallah F Alanazi[6], Hamidah Lafi A Alhazmi[7], Hamdah Laila Ayed Alhazmi[8], Alruwaili, Rasmiah Rajaa M[9], Alanazi, Mashael Humaidan M[10], Shuruq Shime Alenezi[11]

[1]Pediatric Dentistry Senior Registrar – Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Borders Province – Saudi Arabia
* **Corresponding Author Email:** Fadwa-m-a@hotmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-1147-3350

[2]Dental Hygienist – Dental Administration, Najran Health Cluster – Najran – Najran Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: salehsaed@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-2260

[3]Endodontics Registrar – Bisha Dental Center, Asir Health Cluster – Bisha – Asir Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: dr.abdullahqarni@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-8850

[4]Periodontics Registrar – Specialized Dental Center, Al Qunfudah General Hospital, Makkah Health Cluster – Al Qunfudah – Makkah Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: abdulhadim24@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-8940

[5]General Dentist – Najran Specialty Dental Center, Najran Health Cluster – Najran – Najran Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: Duaa.yn@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-7960

[6]Dental Assistant – Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Musaed Specialized Dental Center, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Borders Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: malanaz1414@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-6930

[7]Nursing Technician – Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Musaed Specialized Dental Center, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Borders Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: hlalhazmi@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-5970

[8]Nursing Technician – Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Musaed Specialized Dental Center, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health – Arar – Northern Borders Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: hlelhazmy@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-4920

[9]Nursing Technician – Al Tuwayr Primary Health Care Center, Al Jouf Health Cluster – Sakaka – Al Jouf Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: rralrawily@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-3980

[10]Nursing Specialist – Badanah Primary Health Care Center, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Borders Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: mshalaldhmshy@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-2910

[11]Nursing Specialist – Badanah Primary Health Care Center, Northern Borders Health Cluster – Arar – Northern Borders Province – Saudi Arabia
Email: aa0182@hotmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0047-1990

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Abstract:

Effective monitoring and management of pain and physiological stress during dental procedures is critical to ensuring patient comfort and satisfaction. Dentists play a pivotal role by employing various pain management strategies, including local anesthetics and sedation techniques tailored to each patient's needs. They assess the patient's medical history, anxiety levels, and pain thresholds to create a customized approach. Dental assistants contribute by preparing the treatment area, providing emotional support, and monitoring the patient's vital signs during the procedure. Their training in recognizing signs of discomfort allows them to alert the dentist promptly, ensuring immediate attention is given to any signs of pain or distress. Nurses, especially those with experience in dental settings, contribute to pain management by educating patients about what to expect during procedures and discussing post-operative care. They assist in developing comprehensive pain management plans that may include the prescription of analgesics and advising on non-pharmacological methods such as relaxation techniques. Collaboration among dentists, dental assistants, and nurses is essential in creating a multi-disciplinary approach to managing pain and psychological stress. By sharing information and utilizing their individual expertise, the dental team can foster a supportive environment that promotes overall well-being and enhances the patient's experience.

1. Introduction

The dental environment remains one of the most potent sources of anxiety and fear for a significant portion of the global population, with dental phobia representing a substantial barrier to accessing essential oral healthcare [1]. This aversion is not merely a psychological phenomenon; it triggers profound physiological stress responses that can complicate dental procedures, jeopardize patient safety, and negatively impact treatment outcomes. The experience of pain and the anticipation of it are intrinsically linked to this stress, creating a cycle where fear increases pain perception, and pain, in turn, exacerbates fear and physiological arousal [2]. Consequently, the contemporary philosophy of dental care has evolved beyond the simple mechanical execution of treatments to encompass a holistic, patient-centered approach where the monitoring and management of pain and physiological stress are paramount. This paradigm shift recognizes that successful dentistry is measured not only by the technical quality of a restoration or extraction but also by the patient's subjective experience and their willingness to return for future care.

Physiological stress, in the context of dentistry, manifests as a cascade of neuroendocrine responses orchestrated by the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. The sight, sound, and sensations of the dental office can act as potent stressors, leading to the release of catecholamines (e.g., epinephrine, norepinephrine) and cortisol [3]. These biochemical changes result in measurable physiological alterations: increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, rapid and shallow respiration, peripheral vasoconstriction, and increased muscle tension. For patients with underlying cardiovascular or other systemic conditions, such stress responses can pose genuine medical risks [4]. Furthermore, a stressed and anxious patient is often less cooperative, may have a lowered pain threshold, and may exhibit exaggerated reflexes, such as the gag reflex, making precise dental work challenging and potentially hazardous. Therefore, the effective management of the dental patient is a multifaceted challenge that requires a concerted, informed, and synergistic effort from the entire dental team. It is a continuous process that begins long before the patient sits in the operatory chair and extends beyond the completion of the procedure.

2. The Physiology of Pain and Stress in the Dental Setting

To effectively manage pain and stress, a foundational understanding of their physiological underpinnings is essential. Pain is a complex, multidimensional experience comprising sensory, emotional, and cognitive components. The pathway begins with nociception, where specialized nerve endings (nociceptors) in the pulp, periodontal ligament, and oral mucosa are activated by thermal, mechanical, or chemical stimuli associated with dental procedures [5]. This signal is transmitted via afferent neurons to the dorsal horn of the spinal cord and then ascends through pathways like the spinothalamic tract to higher brain centers, including the thalamus and somatosensory cortex, where the sensation is localized and characterized. Concurrently, limbic system structures such as the amygdala and anterior cingulate cortex process the affective, unpleasant dimension of pain, which is heavily influenced by emotional state and prior experiences [6].Physiological stress shares neural

circuitry with pain and is primarily mediated by the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The perceived threat of a dental procedure activates the amygdala, which signals the hypothalamus to initiate the "fight-or-flight" response via the sympathetic-adrenal-medullary (SAM) axis and the HPA axis [7]. The SAM axis causes the adrenal medulla to release epinephrine and norepinephrine, leading to the immediate cardiovascular and respiratory changes noted earlier. The HPA axis, with a slightly slower onset, results in the secretion of cortisol from the adrenal cortex, mobilizing energy stores and modulating immune function. In dentistry, common triggers include the sight of the syringe, the sound of the high-speed handpiece, the sensation of vibration, feelings of helplessness in the supine position, and past traumatic dental experiences [8]. This stress-induced hyperarousal directly affects pain perception through several mechanisms, including central sensitization (where the spinal cord and brain become hyper-reactive to pain signals) and the inhibition of endogenous pain-modulating pathways [9]. Therefore, a patient entering a state of high anxiety will likely experience procedural pain as more intense and unpleasant, validating the critical need for pre-emptive stress reduction.

3. Pre-Procedural Assessment and Identification of At-Risk Patients

Proactive management begins with the identification of patients who are likely to experience significant pain or stress. Relying on observable signs of distress during the procedure is a reactive and often inadequate strategy. A systematic pre-procedural assessment is therefore a cornerstone of effective care. The dentist bears the primary responsibility for initiating this assessment during the patient history and consultation phase. This involves direct, empathetic questioning. Instead of a generic "Are you nervous?", more effective questions include, "How have you felt about dental visits in the past?" or "Is there anything about today's procedure that particularly concerns you?" [10]. Validated psychometric tools can provide a more objective measure. The Modified Dental Anxiety Scale (MDAS) and the Dental Fear Survey (DFS) are short, reliable questionnaires that can be incorporated into intake forms, helping to quantify anxiety levels and identify severely phobic patients [11].

The dental assistant and nurse play a vital supportive role in this assessment through keen observation and communication. While preparing the patient and operatory, they can note non-verbal cues indicative of anxiety: restlessness, cold or clammy hands, a hesitant gait, excessive questioning, or a failure to make eye contact [12]. They often have more informal interaction time with the patient and can build rapport that encourages the patient to express concerns they may not have voiced to the dentist. Information gathered by the assistant or nurse about a patient's apparent nervousness, repeated questions about pain, or observed physiological signs like trembling should be quietly and professionally communicated to the dentist before the procedure begins. This collaborative identification allows the team to tailor their approach, allocate more time for the appointment, and consider additional management strategies from the outset, setting the stage for a calmer experience.

4. Non-Pharmacological Management Strategies: The Foundation of Patient Comfort

While pharmacology is powerful, non-pharmacological interventions form the essential foundation of pain and stress management and are employed continuously by all team members. These strategies focus on creating a therapeutic environment, providing psychological support, and using techniques that directly modulate the nervous system's response. The dental environment itself is a critical starting point. A calm, clean, and organized operatory with neutral colors, reduced clutter, and the subtle use of aromatherapy (e.g., lavender) can have a calming effect [13]. Hiding threatening instruments from the patient's view until needed is a simple yet highly effective tactic routinely performed by the dental assistant during setup.

Communication is arguably the most potent tool in the non-pharmacological arsenal. The dentist must use clear, positive, and non-threatening language—a practice known as "verbal anesthesia." This involves telling the patient what they will *feel* (pressure, vibration, coolness) rather than what might *hurt* (pinch, sting, cut) [14]. The "tell-show-do" technique, pioneered in pediatric dentistry but equally effective for adults, is fundamental: the dentist or assistant first explains the step, then demonstrates it on a finger or model, and finally performs it [15]. Throughout the procedure, the team should provide ongoing, reassuring commentary. The dental assistant and nurse are instrumental in maintaining this communicative flow. They can offer quiet words of encouragement, explain the next step as they pass an instrument, or simply acknowledge the patient's cooperation with a nod or smile. For patients with severe anxiety, distraction techniques can be employed, such as allowing them to listen to music

or audiobooks through headphones, or the use of virtual reality goggles to immerse them in a calming environment [16].

Physiological modulation techniques offer another avenue. Controlled breathing exercises, guided by any team member, can counteract the rapid, shallow breathing of anxiety and activate the parasympathetic nervous system. Encouraging the patient to take slow, deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth can significantly lower heart rate and promote relaxation [17]. Similarly, progressive muscle relaxation, where the patient consciously tenses and then relaxes muscle groups, can reduce overall somatic tension. The dental assistant, often positioned closest to the patient, can gently remind them to relax their shoulders or unclench their hands. For certain procedures, the use of dental vibrators or electrical stimulation devices applied to the cheek adjacent to the treatment site can exploit the "gate control theory" of pain, where non-painful tactile stimulation interferes with the transmission of pain signals at the spinal cord level [18].

5. Pharmacological Management for Anxiety and Pain Control

When non-pharmacological methods are insufficient, pharmacological intervention becomes necessary. This domain is primarily directed by the dentist, who must possess a thorough knowledge of pharmacology, contraindications, and appropriate dosing. Pharmacological strategies can be categorized by their route and purpose: pre-operative anxiety reduction, intra-operative pain control via local anesthesia, and sedation for deeper relaxation or amnesia.

Pre-operative anxiolysis is often achieved with orally administered medications. Benzodiazepines, such as diazepam or lorazepam, taken an hour before the appointment, provide reliable anxiety reduction, sedation, and muscle relaxation while allowing the patient to remain conscious and responsive [19]. The dentist prescribes these, but the entire team must be aware the patient has taken them. The dental assistant and nurse should ensure the patient has been escorted to the clinic and monitor them for excessive drowsiness. The cornerstone of pain control in dentistry remains local anesthesia. Beyond the technical skill of administering a painless injection, the dentist must select the appropriate agent (e.g., lidocaine, articaine) and vasoconstrictor concentration (e.g., epinephrine) based on the procedure's duration and the patient's medical status [20]. The assistant's role is critical during this phase: applying topical anesthetic gel for sufficient time (at least one minute), preparing the syringe out of the patient's sight, stabilizing tissue during the injection, and providing immediate positive reinforcement afterward.

For patients with severe phobia, special needs, or those undergoing lengthy, complex procedures, conscious sedation or deeper levels of sedation may be indicated. This includes nitrous oxide inhalation sedation (minimal sedation), oral or intravenous moderate sedation, and in hospital settings, deep sedation or general anesthesia administered by an anesthesiologist [21]. The use of nitrous oxide, often managed by the dentist with the assistant's help, is a valuable tool due to its rapid onset, quick recovery, and anxiolytic and analgesic properties [22]. In all sedative scenarios, the role of monitoring physiological parameters expands dramatically. While the dentist is ultimately responsible, the dental assistant and nurse become vital pairs of eyes and ears, continuously tracking the patient's responsiveness, airway patency, ventilation, and circulation.

6. Intra-Operative Monitoring of Physiological Parameters

Continuous monitoring is the safety net that ensures pharmacological and non-pharmacological management is proceeding safely and effectively. For routine procedures on healthy patients, this monitoring is often informal but constant. However, for anxious patients, those with medical comorbidities, or those under sedation, formal monitoring is mandatory. The parameters of interest are those most directly affected by the stress response and anesthetic agents: cardiovascular status, respiratory function, and neurological responsiveness.

The most basic and continuous form of monitoring is visual and verbal contact. The dentist, focused on the surgical field, relies heavily on the dental assistant and nurse to maintain this global awareness. The assistant should frequently glance at the patient's face for signs of distress, pallor, or sweating, and monitor the rise and fall of the chest for respiratory rate and pattern [23]. For more objective data, instrumental monitoring is employed. Pulse oximetry is now considered a standard of care for patients under any form of sedation, providing a continuous readout of peripheral oxygen saturation (SpO2) and pulse rate [24]. A drop in SpO2 is often the earliest sign of respiratory depression. The dental assistant is typically responsible for applying the probe, setting up the monitor within clear view of the team, and alerting the dentist to any concerning trends. Blood pressure monitoring, using an automated cuff,

should be recorded at baseline, after anesthesia administration, and at regular intervals during longer procedures, especially if vasoconstrictors are used [25]. This task is often performed by the dental nurse or assistant. For deep sedation, capnography, which measures end-tidal carbon dioxide, provides an even more sensitive indicator of ventilation than pulse oximetry alone [26].

Crucially, monitoring is meaningless without interpretation and a prepared response. All team members must know the normal ranges and pre-determined thresholds for intervention. For example, a sustained rise in heart rate or blood pressure during a stressful part of the procedure may indicate inadequate pain control or rising anxiety, prompting the dentist to administer more local anesthetic or use calming language. A falling SpO2 demands immediate cessation of the procedure, stimulation of the patient, and ensuring an open airway. This shared vigilance creates a safe container within which the dentist can focus on the technical aspects of the procedure.

7. The Specific Role of the Dentist as Leader and Clinician

The dentist's role in pain and stress management is one of leadership, clinical decision-making, and the performance of key irreversible interventions. It begins with comprehensive diagnosis and treatment planning, where the dentist must consider not only the pathology but also the patient's psychological profile and medical history when designing the treatment approach. This may involve scheduling shorter appointments, using a trauma-informed approach for victims of previous dental or other trauma, or deciding on the necessity of sedation [27]. The dentist is solely responsible for obtaining informed consent, which includes a detailed discussion of what pain and discomfort to expect and how it will be managed.

The administration of local anesthesia is a definitive clinical skill that rests with the dentist. Mastery of techniques for painless injection, such as slow injection rates, using sharp needles, and effective topical anesthesia, is paramount. Furthermore, the dentist must decide on the appropriate volume and type of anesthetic, considering the procedure's length and the need for hemostasis [28]. During the procedure, the dentist must maintain an acute awareness of the patient's comfort, frequently checking in with short, closed-ended questions like, "Are you doing okay?" to which a nod or shake of the head can suffice. They must interpret the feedback from the patient and the monitoring data provided by the team to adjust their management in real-time—whether that means supplementing anesthesia, taking a short break, or employing additional calming techniques.

In cases requiring pharmacological sedation, the dentist's role expands further. For nitrous oxide sedation, they titrate the concentration to the desired effect. For oral sedation, they prescribe the medication. If providing intravenous moderate sedation, they must have advanced training and assume full responsibility for the drug administration, physiological stability, and recovery of the patient [29]. Throughout, the dentist sets the emotional tone for the team. A calm, confident, and empathetic demeanor from the dentist is infectious, reassuring both the patient and the supporting staff. They delegate tasks clearly, ensure everyone understands the plan for the day, and foster an environment where any team member feels empowered to voice a concern about the patient's status.

8. The Specific Role of the Dental Assistant:

The dental assistant operates at the very nexus of the clinical procedure and the patient's experience, serving as an indispensable facilitator and liaison. Their role is dynamic, blending anticipatory support, technical assistance, and continuous patient advocacy. Before the patient arrives, the assistant's preparation of the operatory is the first step in stress reduction, ensuring a tidy, calm environment and pre-emptively hiding alarming instruments. Their initial greeting of the patient is often the first clinical interaction, setting a warm and welcoming tone. During the pre-operative assessment, the assistant's observational skills are critical for picking up on non-verbal cues of anxiety that the dentist may initially miss.

During the procedure, the assistant's contributions to pain and stress management are multifaceted. At the most basic level, their impeccable four-handed dentistry technique minimizes procedure time and increases efficiency, thereby reducing the duration of the patient's stress exposure [30]. Their anticipation of the dentist's needs ensures a smooth workflow without frustrating pauses. During the administration of local anesthesia, the assistant's actions are crucial for a painless experience: properly applying topical anesthetic, passing the loaded syringe discreetly, and often using a gentle hand to stabilize the patient's cheek or provide counter-pressure during the injection—a tactile form of reassurance. They are the primary manager of the oral environment, using high-volume evacuation and retraction to keep the field clear, which prevents choking sensations, reduces gagging, and minimizes unpleasant tastes and smells [31].

Perhaps most importantly, the dental assistant is the patient's constant companion and advocate at chairside. They maintain continuous, gentle communication through touch (a reassuring hand on the shoulder) and voice. They interpret the dentist's actions for the patient in real-time, offer praise and encouragement, and are the first to notice a subtle wince, a tear, or a clenched fist. They manage the "stop signal"—a pre-arranged hand raise that immediately halts the procedure—ensuring the patient feels in control [32]. The assistant is also primarily responsible for monitoring basic physiological signs and the readouts from devices like the pulse oximeter, serving as the dentist's early warning system for any signs of physiological distress.

9. The Specific Role of the Dental Nurse in Assessment, Monitoring, and Support

The role of the dental nurse, particularly in systems where this is distinct from the chairside assistant, encompasses broader pre- and post-operative care, advanced monitoring, and administrative coordination of patient comfort strategies. In many practices, the nurse is the first clinical point of contact, conducting the initial patient interview and collecting health history data, which includes screening for anxiety and past negative dental experiences [33]. This places them in a unique position to flag high-anxiety patients to the dentist before the clinical examination even begins.

During procedures, especially those involving sedation or medically compromised patients, the dental nurse often assumes primary responsibility for physiological monitoring. They may be tasked with recording vital signs at set intervals, documenting medication administration times and doses, and maintaining the sedation record [34]. Their focus is less on the technical field and more on the holistic status of the patient. They ensure the patient is positioned comfortably with adequate support, manage blankets for temperature control, and are alert to any signs of syncope or vasovagal reactions. In longer procedures, they may facilitate breaks for the patient to rinse, close their mouth, and relax momentarily.

The nurse's role extends significantly into the post-operative period, which is critical for managing delayed pain and preventing anxiety about future visits. They provide clear, written post-operative instructions regarding pain medication (analgesics like ibuprofen or acetaminophen, often prescribed by the dentist), management of swelling, and what to expect during healing [35]. A follow-up phone call the next day from the nurse to check on the patient's comfort level is a powerful tool for building trust and demonstrating care beyond the clinical encounter. Furthermore, the nurse often coordinates future appointments, and for an anxious patient, scheduling the next prophylaxis or check-up soon after a positive experience can help consolidate gains and break the cycle of avoidance [36]. They may also manage resources such as audio-visual distraction equipment or information pamphlets on dental anxiety.

10. Managing Special Populations:

The principles of pain and stress management must be adapted to meet the unique needs of special populations. Pediatric dentistry presents distinct challenges and opportunities. Children's anxiety is often rooted in fear of the unknown, separation from parents, and loss of control [37]. Non-pharmacological techniques like tell-show-do, positive reinforcement, and modeling are paramount. The roles of the team are adjusted: the dentist acts as a friendly guide, the assistant often engages in age-appropriate distraction and praise, and the nurse may help prepare the child in the waiting area and support the parent. Pharmacological management ranges from topical anesthetics to conscious sedation, always with age-appropriate dosing and heightened monitoring vigilance.

Geriatric patients present a different set of considerations. They may have diminished physiological reserves, multiple medical comorbidities, polypharmacy, and cognitive impairments [38]. Anxiety in older adults can be exacerbated by sensory deficits (hearing loss, poor eyesight) and fear of loss of independence. The dental team must communicate clearly, possibly with written aids, and move at a deliberate pace. Pharmacokinetics are altered in older adults; lower doses of anxiolytics or local anesthetics may be required, and the use of vasoconstrictors must be carefully evaluated against cardiovascular status [39]. The dental assistant and nurse play a key role in ensuring the patient's physical comfort, assisting with transfers if needed, and providing simple, repeated explanations.

Medically complex patients, such as those with significant cardiovascular disease, pulmonary disorders, or severe neurological conditions, require meticulous pre-procedural consultation with physicians and careful intra-operative management. The stress of a dental procedure can precipitate medical emergencies like angina or acute hypertension [40]. For these patients, stress reduction is not merely about comfort but a critical safety imperative. The entire team must be thoroughly briefed on the patient's condition,

necessary medications must be readily available (e.g., nitroglycerin, albuterol), and monitoring must be intensive. The dentist manages the medical interface and procedure, the assistant focuses on efficient chairside support to minimize time, and the nurse is central to continuous monitoring and emergency preparedness.

11. Conclusion:

The effective monitoring and management of pain and physiological stress during dental procedures is not the responsibility of a single individual but the product of a highly coordinated, interdisciplinary effort. It represents a fundamental aspect of ethical and patient-centered dental practice. From the initial assessment to the final post-operative follow-up, each member of the dental team—dentist, dental assistant, and dental nurse—brings a unique and essential set of skills to this endeavor. The dentist provides leadership, clinical expertise, and performs key interventions. The dental assistant serves as the operational and emotional linchpin at chairside, facilitating efficiency and providing continuous reassurance. The dental nurse extends care beyond the operatory, managing holistic assessment, detailed monitoring, and post-procedural support.

When these roles are understood, respected, and seamlessly integrated, the dental team can successfully break the cycle of fear and pain that has long plagued the profession. They create an environment where patients feel heard, respected, and safe. This not only improves the immediate experience and clinical outcomes but also fosters long-term oral health by encouraging regular dental attendance. The ultimate goal is to transform dentistry from something to be endured into an accepted, and even positive, component of overall healthcare. Achieving this requires a commitment from every team member to prioritize patient comfort through continuous education, refined communication, and unwavering vigilance, thereby establishing a new and higher standard of care for all.

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