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### Legal dentistry

## CAREER SATISFACTION IN FORENSIC ODONTOLOGY.

### *Satisfação na carreira em Odontologia Forense.*

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#### ABSTRACT

Background: Dentistry faces challenges such as evolving technology and complex patient needs that could affect career satisfaction. Also, different career pathways would present different career challenges. Aims: This study assessed the opinions of forensic dentists on the level of career satisfaction to better understand the barriers professionals face and to enhance the growth and effectiveness of the field. Methodology: A 12-question JISC online survey (V3) was distributed globally, and responses were quantitatively analysed using Microsoft 365 MSO. Results: 72% (of a total of 74 respondents) are experienced professionals, where 86% felt their work was impactful and 59% expressed career satisfaction. Furthermore, they feel a sense of autonomy (65%), they can successfully execute a task from beginning to end (62%), their work requires complex skills (77%), their work is of significant impact (86%) and they generally performed well (59%). Over half (52.70%) showed interest in multiple areas of forensic odontology, with disaster victim identification (DVI) being the most popular. Conclusion: A sense of accomplishment was reported within their profession, but challenges were acknowledged and included job insecurity, underpayment, lack of recognition, and communication issues. Recommendations such as fair payment, available training, strong support networks and a formalized role in the legal system are suggested for improving career satisfaction in forensic odontology because they help quality assurance, professional development, which are critical in a challenging and high-stress field.

#### KEYWORDS

Career satisfaction; Forensic odontology; Disaster victim identification; Human identification.

#### INTRODUCTION

Forensic dentistry requires specialized knowledge, skills, training, and ethics due to interactions with various stakeholders, including victims' families and legal professionals and collaboration with multidisciplinary teams<sup>1,2</sup>. Recognizing challenges or key stress factors in forensic odontology is very important because it helps improve the accuracy, reliability, and

credibility of the field. They include the frequent exposure to death and abuse cases<sup>3</sup>, the inaccurate *antemortem* data, limited resources, political factors, and cultural barriers in disaster victim identification (DVI) efforts and beyond<sup>4,5</sup>.

Career satisfaction in dentistry depends on factors such as professional recognition, wages, opportunities for career development, staff relations, patient

characteristics and time pressure which can affect performance and personal health. Understanding career satisfaction is crucial for enhancing motivation, performance, retention, and well-being<sup>6-9</sup>. There has been substantial research into career satisfaction among dental professionals, but only in recent years has the career pathway in Forensic Odontology been investigated. A comprehensive global survey found that 27.7% of forensic odontologists report dissatisfaction with professional support and recognition<sup>10</sup>. Some challenges such as stress, pressure and exposure to sensitive cases have been evidenced<sup>11</sup>. Despite these challenges, 89.6% of dental students perceive forensic odontology as having good professional scope<sup>12</sup>, suggesting potential for future improvement in career satisfaction. For this reason, this study aimed to investigate further the opinions of forensic dentists on the level of career satisfaction.

## METHODOLOGY

Ethical approval was granted by the Schools of Health Sciences and Dentistry Research Ethics Committee under the code UOD-SREC-SDEN- 2023-036. An anonymous [JISC online surveys V3](#) composed of 12 questions (Q1-Q12) being Q1 (agreement and consent), Q2 (age in years), Q3 (gender), Q4 – Q11 (opinions on working) and Q12, five statements were created following Job Characteristics Model (JCM)<sup>13</sup>, which is a work design theory that seeks to find the key factors that make a job motivating, satisfying, and engaging for employees by focusing on five core job characteristics autonomy, task identity, skill

variety, task significance and feedback as seen in Table 1. Members of the International Organization for Forensic Odonto-Stomatology (IOFOS) and related associations received the e-survey by email in March 2024. Results were automated and quantitatively analysed in tables and graphs (Microsoft 365 MSO).

## RESULTS

The survey was completed by 74 consenting forensic odontologists (39F; 34M, and 1 unidentified). The largest age group was over 60 years (26%, n=19), followed by the '30–40-year group' (23%, n=17), then the '20–30-year group' (18%, n=13), '40–50-year group' (16%, n=12) and the '50–60-year group' (15%, n=11). Age was not shown by 2 (3%) participants. Considering experience, most respondents were still in training (28%, n=21) and the fewest were in the 25-30 years of experience group (5%, n=4). A balanced distribution was seen amongst groups 5–10 years (18%, n=13), more than 30 years and 10-15 years (equally 14%, n=10), 15-20 years (12%, n=9), 20–25 years (9%, n= 7; 5 males).

### **Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) and human identification as the most preferred tasks**

Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) and human identification were the most preferred fields alone (35.1%; n = 26) and combined with other domains (86%; n = 64.) Following, dental age assessment and dental malpractice are equally of preference (34%; n = 24). Bitemarks preferred by three participants and combined (32%; n = 24).

Two further participants chose all the available options, while three expressed a preference for working on child abuse cases. Two respondents added their preferred areas as single-body identification and dental trauma and neglect.

About satisfaction with DVI deployment, most have not been deployed (42%, n=31) followed by satisfied (36%, n=27). Additionally, some could not comment (11%, n=8) and others were dissatisfied (7%, n=5) followed by 4% selected "other" as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Career Satisfaction Dimensions Among Forensic Odontologists (n=74)**

Domain	Measure	Satisfied n (%)	Dissatisfied n (%)	Neutral/Other n (%)	Not Yet Practising n (%)
<b>Task Preferences</b>					
Q5. <i>What is your preferred field of forensic odontology?</i>	DVI/Human ID (alone)	26 (35.1)	—	—	—
	DVI/Human ID (combined)	64 (86.5)	—	—	—
	Dental age assessment	24 (34.3)	—	—	—
	Dental malpractice	24 (34.3)	—	—	—
	Bite marks (combined)	24 (32.4)	—	—	—
<b>Confidence &amp; Satisfaction</b>					
Q6. <i>Is DVI deployment satisfactory?</i>	DVI deployment satisfaction	27 (36.5)	5 (6.8)	8 (10.8)	31 (41.9)
Q7. <i>Do you feel confident in dental age assessment cases?</i>	Confidence in age assessment	35 (47.3)	24 (32.4)	9 (12.2)	6 (8.1)
Q8. <i>Overall, are you satisfied working in the forensic odontology field?</i>	Overall career satisfaction	44 (59.5)	6 (8.1)	4 (5.4)	20 (27.0)
<b>Professional Recognition</b>					
Q9. <i>Generally, do you feel you are well-paid for your forensic work?</i>	Payment satisfaction	20 (27.0)	25 (33.8)	6 (8.1)	20 (27.0)
Q10. <i>Is your work as a forensic odontologist recognised and valued in your country?</i>	Professional recognition	32 (43.2)	26 (35.1)	12 (16.2)	4 (5.4)
Q11. <i>Are you satisfied with the level of communication in the field?</i>	Communication satisfaction	32 (43.2)	27 (36.5)	11 (14.9)	4 (5.4)

### **Less than half of the sample expressed confidence in dental age estimation cases, and most are satisfied with the field of Forensic Odontology**

Most are confident in dental age estimation cases (47%; n=35), followed by not confident (32%; n=24), no comment (12%; n=9) and 8% (n=6) the "other" option as shown in Table 1. The majority (59%, n=44) reported career satisfaction. Among those with 'over 30 years' and '20–25 years of experience', all respondents (100%) were satisfied. This satisfaction rate was 90% for those with '10–15 years of experience'. Only 8% (n=6) were unsatisfied, spanning all age groups. Notably, 27% (n=20) have not started working in the field. Additionally, 5% (n=4) have not opined.

### **Finance, recognition and communication**

In the group working in the field, 34% (n=25) expressed dissatisfaction with their *pay* whilst 27% (n= 20) felt satisfied. The *recognition of forensic odontology* was evaluated, revealing that 43% (n=32) were satisfied with the profession's recognition in their country. Conversely, 35% (n=26) reported a lack of recognition, with about half of this group still undergoing training despite the low valuation of their field. Only 43% (n=32) were satisfied with the current state of *communication among forensic dentists*. In contrast, 36% (n=27) expressed dissatisfaction.

Considering the opinions on the statements that describe the work in the Forensic Odontology field, the majority (n=48; 65%) of respondents feel their

employment grants them *autonomy* to use personal initiative and judgement. 62% (n=46) believe they can successfully *execute a task* from beginning to end. 77% (n=57) agree that their work requires *complex skills*, with 44% agreeing and 33% strongly agreeing. A strong majority (86%, n=64) believe their work is of *significant impact*, with 42% agreeing and 44% strongly agreeing. 59% (n=42) agreed or strongly agreed that they know they performed well (*feedback*). Overall results are shown in Table 2.

### **DISCUSSION**

In this study, human identification by dental means is one of the most preferred tasks. Its efficiency, cost-effectiveness and recognition by INTERPOL as one of the three primary methods of human identification<sup>2,14,15</sup>. DVI deployments also allow a deeper understanding of complex forensic procedures, knowledge transfer, skill development, and serve a profound humanitarian purpose<sup>17</sup>. Dental malpractice and dental age assessment were the second-most preferred fields, which highlights that professionals really enjoy work for matters of migration control and dispute in court<sup>16,21</sup>. Bite mark cases were less popular among participants (n=24) and often combined with other forensic disciplines. This unpopularity may stem from significant scrutiny and DNA exonerations revealing incorrect bite mark identifications and the critiques from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report<sup>18</sup>.

**Table 2 - Overall results for the five statements created following Job Characteristics Model (JCM).**

Question and statements	Strongly agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neither agree or disagree n (%)	Strongly disagree n (%)	Disagree N (%)
<i>Q12. How well do the following statements describe your work in the Forensic Odontology field?</i>					
<i>A) The job allows me to use my initiative and judgement in carrying out the work (autonomy).</i>	17 (23)	31 (42)	18 (25)	4 (5)	3 (4)
<i>B) The job is arranged so that I can do an entire piece of work from beginning to end (task identity).</i>	20 (27)	26 (35)	17 (23)	3(4)	(11)
<i>C) The job requires me to use many complex or high-level skills (skill variety).</i>	24 (33)	33 (44)	13 (18)	1 (1)	3 (4)
<i>D) The job itself is significant in the broader scheme of things (task significance).</i>	33 (44)	31 (42)	8 (11)	1 (1)	1 (1)
<i>E) After I finish a job, I know whether I performed well or did not (feedback).</i>	15 (22)	27 (37)	25 (34)	1 (1)	6 (5)

According to these findings, the confidence in dental age assessment cases is low. Methodological variability, a lack of universally recognized criteria, and difficulties assessing adults' dental age contribute to reliability and accuracy challenges. Forensic odontologists struggle to select and apply a method for age estimation, indicating a problem at the foundational level<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, the limitations of various methods, such as the subjective nature of scoring, methods developed for specific populations to underrepresented groups, technological limitations and the challenges of assessing decomposed bodies, further contribute to feelings of insecurity<sup>20,21</sup>.

A significant finding in this study was the high level of satisfaction among forensic dentists (44 out of 74) being males more satisfied. Previous studies showed that male experts predominantly conduct

teaching in forensic odontology, highlighting gender-related factors affecting the field's education<sup>22,23</sup>. Various factors, including income, relationships with colleagues and patients, the workplace environment, respect, and professional context, influence career satisfaction in dentistry<sup>24</sup>. While some studies suggest no correlation between years of experience and career satisfaction<sup>25</sup>, others indicate that experience and practice duration significantly contribute to career satisfaction<sup>26</sup>. Respondents attribute their high satisfaction levels to the passionate nature of the profession, which offers relief and closure to affected families and aids in reclaiming lost identities<sup>10</sup>. Forensic dentistry allows practitioners to apply their dental knowledge to forensic science, providing a break from clinical practice and opportunities to collaborate with

professionals from various fields, law enforcement, and government organizations. This unique career path provides experiences beyond traditional dental practice<sup>27</sup>.

The results revealed a notable discrepancy in satisfaction regarding payment and compensation. Of the 74 participants, 25 (33.8%) expressed dissatisfaction with their compensation, although 80% reported general satisfaction with the profession. A significant positive correlation was identified between payment satisfaction and overall career satisfaction, with 95% of respondents satisfied with their payment also indicating overall satisfaction with their jobs. Studies indicated that income significantly influences career satisfaction among dentists and professionals<sup>26,28</sup>. Older dentists with higher incomes, ongoing education, and more dental auxiliaries report higher satisfaction levels compared to their less satisfied counterparts<sup>29</sup>.

The study revealed a fluctuation in the recognition levels of forensic odontology, with a slight tendency towards satisfaction. The respondents who expressed the highest level of satisfaction acknowledged receiving recognition for their work. Initially, the profession faced slow acceptance in the UK and other countries. Scandinavian workers and the Federation Dentaire International (FDI) significantly promoted its value, leading to its recognition as a supplementary tool in legal proceedings. The British courts, along with others, now acknowledge dental expertise, preferring a comprehensive approach to evidence<sup>30</sup>. In developing

countries, incorporating dental evidence into court proceedings has been gradual. It was first used in Australia in the early 20th century to identify homicide victims, and the UK follows a complex legal system influenced by common law, which has an impact on many developing nations. Consequently, dental evidence recognition has progressed, with forensic odontology now widely accepted in the UK and developing countries<sup>30</sup>.

The accreditation of forensic odontologists in evolving countries shows ongoing efforts to establish strong criteria and methodologies to address emerging challenges and enhance justice and identification processes. Pakistan and Sudan are working towards recognition and progress in forensic odontology<sup>31,32</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, significant challenges include a lack of qualified staff<sup>33</sup>. Forensic dental organizations should collaborate with universities and dental councils to gain official recognition and establish regulations for growth in research, education and casework<sup>22</sup>.

The level of satisfaction of forensic dentists in their communication with colleagues is not great. Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential where comprehensive identification is necessary. This requires cooperation among investigators and medical professionals in anthropology, biology, radiology, forensic medicine, and forensic odontologists<sup>34</sup>. Job resources, such as professional skill adaptation and engaging with peer networks, help manage high job demands and sustain work engagement, mitigating workload impact, and ensuring the

continued effectiveness of forensic professionals<sup>35</sup>. Effective communication by forensic scientists is crucial to overcoming obstacles like cultural disparities and varying audience expectations<sup>36,37</sup>. Every country should establish independent forensic dental bodies to recognize the profession, exchange knowledge, enhance communication, and ensure the implementation of best practices in forensic dentistry<sup>23,38</sup>.

Forensic odontologists often work *autonomously*, making critical decisions in several cases. The irregular nature of their tasks can cause them to work during off-hours, affecting their clinical schedule and family time. As a result, access to mental health support is crucial to managing the emotional and psychological challenges of their profession, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and improving their ability to handle cases effectively and independently<sup>2</sup>. In terms of *task identity*, most of the participants agreed that they could complete entire tasks from start to finish. Continuous training is vital to ensure accurate identification and avoid wrongful convictions<sup>38</sup>. Sufficient resources are essential for effective DVI operations, including personnel, equipment, and storage facilities, as well as comprehensive databases and verification methods<sup>39</sup>. *Skill variety* is crucial, requiring forensic dentists to have a wide range of competencies including scientific knowledge, practical proficiency, and ethical considerations. They must stay updated with emerging technologies and maintain proficient communication skills for collaboration with law enforcement, legal practitioners and

other forensic professionals<sup>2,22,40</sup>. Complex tasks such as bite mark analysis and dental age estimation require specialized knowledge, needing advanced techniques and ongoing research to enhance accuracy and reliability<sup>41</sup>.

The study showed overwhelming agreement on the *task significance* of forensic dentistry, with 63 (out of 74) respondents acknowledging its significance and importance. Forensic dentistry provides crucial insights and evidence in legal and humanitarian contexts<sup>27,42</sup>. Most respondents agreed on the importance of receiving *feedback* in forensic dentistry. Feedback is essential for professional development and improving service quality. It should be collaborative, customized, and actionable to overcome obstacles such as fear of criticism and resistance to change and ultimately improve individual and organizational outcomes<sup>17,43,44</sup>.

Considering the challenges met in this study, a set of recommendations is suggested, considering the *professional capacitation*: a) continuous education and training to improve their skills and stay up to date with the latest advancements. This can enhance their value and desirability in their field<sup>40</sup>; b) diversification to broader expertise to include a wider array of forensic services can improve job prospects and market value<sup>40</sup>; c) networking in professional associations and conferences and collaborative research can increase job prospects and partnerships<sup>2,40</sup>; d) Highlighting the humanitarian work that forensic dentists perform can lead to broader recognition and support from governmental authorities, potentially

enhancing job security<sup>10</sup>; e) fair remuneration: forensic dentists should advocate for equitable remuneration by emphasizing the significance and complexity of their work for the legal system and society<sup>40</sup>. It is suggested that the *recognition of the role of a forensic dentist* relies on: a) the increase in public, especially among law enforcement and investigative agencies<sup>2,40</sup>. b) Formal partnerships: Promoting collaborations between forensic dental organizations, universities, and dental councils<sup>2</sup>. and c) education: Integrating communication skills training into forensic dentistry education can equip practitioners to effectively engage with law enforcement, legal professionals, and the public<sup>2,33,40</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Forensic dentists reported a sense of accomplishment and valued the camaraderie within their profession. The profession's impact is significant in both

legal and humanitarian fields, from aiding in mass casualty identification to supporting criminal investigations and addressing human trafficking concerns. Despite the essential contributions of forensic dentists, there is a notable gap in their deployment and recognition, which may be due to limited opportunities and a lack of widespread understanding within the legal and investigative communities. The study also highlights areas of concern, including low confidence in dental age assessment methods and dissatisfaction with compensation, suggesting that further improvements in training, resources, and recognition are necessary.

Ultimately, enhancing the visibility and credibility of forensic dentistry requires sustained efforts in education, professional development, and advocacy. By addressing these challenges, the profession can achieve greater recognition and contribute more effectively to justice and humanitarian causes.

## RESUMO

Contexto: A odontologia enfrenta desafios como a evolução da tecnologia e as necessidades complexas dos pacientes, que podem afetar a satisfação profissional. Além disso, diferentes trajetórias de carreira apresentam diferentes desafios. Objetivos: Este estudo avaliou a opinião de dentistas forenses sobre o nível de satisfação profissional para melhor compreender as barreiras enfrentadas pelos profissionais e promover o crescimento e a eficácia da área. Metodologia: Um questionário online JISC (V3) com 12 perguntas foi distribuído globalmente e as respostas foram analisadas quantitativamente utilizando o Microsoft 365 MSO. Resultados: 72% (de um total de 74 respondentes) são profissionais experientes, dos quais 86% consideram seu trabalho impactante e 59% expressaram satisfação profissional. Além disso, eles sentem autonomia (65%), conseguem executar uma tarefa com sucesso do início ao fim (62%), seu trabalho exige habilidades complexas (77%), seu trabalho tem um impacto significativo (86%) e, em geral, têm um bom desempenho (59%). Mais da metade (52,70%) demonstrou interesse em múltiplas áreas da odontologia forense, sendo a identificação de vítimas de desastres (IVD) a mais popular. Conclusão: Os profissionais relataram um sentimento de realização dentro da profissão, mas reconheceram desafios, incluindo insegurança no trabalho, remuneração insuficiente, falta de reconhecimento e problemas de comunicação. Recomendações como remuneração justa, acesso a treinamentos, redes de apoio sólidas e um papel formalizado no sistema jurídico são sugeridas para melhorar a satisfação na carreira em odontologia forense, pois contribuem para a garantia da qualidade e o desenvolvimento profissional, que são cruciais em uma área desafiadora e de alta pressão.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Satisfação na carreira; Odontologia legal; Identificação de vítimas de desastres; Identificação humana.

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