Towards quality in qualitative research

Sir,

I write to comment on the article ‘The impact of hypodontia: a qualitative study on the experiences of patients’ by (Meaney et al., 2012). I read this article with great interest. Whilst the information presented in this article were of high importance by adopting a qualitative approach to explore patients’ experiences in relation to hypodontia, there were some methodological aspects related to the validity of the results that should have been employed while conducting the study or at least addressing them as limitations in the Discussion section.

As in quantitative research, there are methods, different from those used in quantitative research, employed to assess reliability and validity in qualitative research. Unfortunately, the validity of the aforementioned study’s findings was missing or not clearly presented. Furthermore, the process of data interpretation lacks clarification, in particular, the identification of the main themes. Was it done by one of the authors? Or data were analysed by all authors? Were data analysed independently and then comparison between emerging themes identified from each investigator was done? Did the authors conduct pilot interviews before commencing the main interviews to ensure standardization during the interviewing process and fair dealing with all participants of the study?

Despite the fact that there are several methods used to assess quality of qualitative studies, there was no mention of any method adopted in the published study. Indeed, there seems to be a disagreement on which method is considered superior when evaluating validity in qualitative research. Nevertheless, addressing the validity of the results is a common practice in qualitative research, in order to demonstrate ‘scientific rigour’ rather than ‘soft’ scientific results.

To the best of my knowledge, there are many methods used to assess validity in qualitative research (Mays and Pope, 2000). Respondent validity, which is used in many qualitative research studies, involves returning the data and findings to participants in order to obtain their validation. Reflexivity is another method adopted in evaluating validity. It assesses whether the findings of the study might have been influenced by personal and/or intellectual bias. Triangulation is a method that has been associated with robust qualitative research. Triangulation may include multiple methods of data collection and data analysis (Golafshani, 2003). Other methods include peer review/debriefing and external auditing, which involve having the researcher not involved in the research process evaluate the accuracy of methods, interpretations, and findings (Cohen and Crabtree, 2008).

Qualitative approaches in dentistry have become very popular in the last decade. They allow researchers to answer important research questions that are difficult to address satisfactorily using quantitative methods alone. Therefore, careful planning, understanding, and execution are imperative if we are to revive this approach in the dental literature.

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References

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