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UBC DMD Admissions— DIVERSIFIED ASSESSMENTS SEEK ROUNDED CANDIDATES

BY HEATHER CONN

Two UBC Dentistry experts weigh in on their respective key areas used to assess Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) candidates at an admissions open house. Final applicants rotate through four problem-based learning (PBL) sessions in the morning and eight mini interviews (MIs) in the afternoon.

Beyond clinical abilities, a grade point average and test scores, how can you tell who will have the people skills to view a dental patient as a whole person, rather than just someone with a tooth problem to fix?

That's part of the challenge facing UBC Dentistry in wanting to attract "the best and the brightest"—in the words of Dr. David Sweet OC, professor of dentistry and chair of DMD admissions—to its Doctor of Dental Medicine program.

Traditionally, the standard admissions process has involved the same one to three interviewers asking all of the questions, one applicant at a time. Prospective students do not rotate to different rooms, nor face new questioners. Recognizing the limitations of this approach, UBC Dentistry has chosen solo and

group dynamics with more variety and more interviewers.

Problem-Solving Team Players Wanted

Imagine eight would-be dental students, all strangers to each other, discussing a case study they've just read: *A 50-year-old patient had an antibiotic (two grams of amoxicillin) administered orally 45 minutes ago. Sitting in your waiting room, she tells your receptionist that she is feeling itchy. Then she complains that her throat is tightening. She can't breathe. Her lips turn blue. What will you do next?*

How would you determine which students would make the best dentists based on their

interactions and responses in a PBL session?

"I don't think there's some magical process that guarantees you'll grant admission to the perfect student," says Leandra Best, a UBC Dentistry clinical professor and associate dean of Academic Affairs. Best oversees the problem-based learning process for admissions that is used to screen DMD applicants.

During each rotating 45-minute PBL session, each applicant is assessed by two different faculty, so are seen by eight faculty members overall. For each of four different PBL case studies, the two faculty tutors facilitate interactive discussions among a group of seven to eight applicants. This process is intended to provide a clear picture not only of someone's professional abilities, but their situational changes in behaviour.



Dr. Leandra Best

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Applicants are graded on their potential ability to achieve professional competencies, including “non-cognitive traits.” Beyond reasoning, problem-solving and ability to follow instructions, other factors are assessed, such as group dynamics, body language, tone of voice, listening skills and intuitive ability.

Problem-based learning, offered at UBC Dentistry for more than two decades, encourages student-driven inquiry and active participation. It is designed to help students develop self-motivated, lifelong learning skills and to use “critical and analytical thinking, to assess, diagnose and manage complex cases,” according to a fall 2010 edition of *Impressions*.

Best points out some of the considerable benefits this assessment offers compared to standardized formats:

- The carefully designed problems are created to evoke empathy, professionalism and ethical decision-making, requiring applicants to be intuitive, not just logical; after all, a lack of “people skills” may be far more challenging to remediate than technical abilities. Therefore, the scenarios not only address the biomedical and clinical sciences, but the behavioural sciences as well.
- Since applicants are not assessed on knowledge of case content, they can’t prepare for the sessions by memorizing any case material.
- Applicants perform in a group setting, similar to working in a dental practice.
- Examiners can observe applicants in four different group dynamics, including how they listen, reason and speak to, and with, a range of personalities.

“We can see if someone is being dismissive or

bored, is rushing and impatient, being dominant and overtaking, and not playing as a good team player,” Best says.

Since eight people assess the applicants, this minimizes the bias that might occur with just one or two examiners, she adds. Each UBC PBL examiner marks applicants independently. The grades are averaged; if there’s a big variance, Best will interview the assessors. She reaffirms to them: “You’re looking for people who have the potential to think, act and shine as dentists. It’s more than just clinical psychomotor/technical skills.”

Best believes UBC Dentistry is the only dental faculty in Canada that uses problem-based learning to screen applicants in the admissions process.

Multiple Mini Interviews for More Exposure

After investigating numerous interview techniques, Dr. Karen Gardner, clinical dentistry professor and director of Integrated Care Clinics, determined that the multiple mini interview (MI) system with a variety of examiners would provide a fairer, more reliable method of assessing DMD candidates than standard one-hour or longer interviews with only one or two interviewers. (Eighteen trained faculty volunteers, including two backups, provide MI interviews for UBC Dentistry.) As UBC’s chair of DMD dental admissions interviews, she introduced a new recruitment format in 2012 for DMD applicants: each candidate rotates alone through eight 10-minute interviews with a different lone faculty volunteer each time.

It was felt that the MI technique, combined with Best’s problem-based learning sessions, would build a solid psychological, professional and ethical profile of a candidate, increasing the chances of accepting a stellar, well-rounded candidate. Observing how people behave both on their own in an MI and in a group PBL setting is invaluable, Gardner and Best both agree. Otherwise, a standard interview can focus on someone’s well-crafted persona and academic achievements, rather than picking up on character flaws.

For example, Gardner points out, a brilliant academic student who’s a sports hero might “put on a show” and manipulate a single interviewer, trying to read the questioner’s face and respond accordingly. This interaction wouldn’t reveal that he balks at authority and doesn’t take criticism well. Similarly, a caring introvert might be overlooked. The skilfully designed scenarios used in both MI and problem-based learning help to prevent such limited assessments and to unearth less desirable qualities.

Each MI session addresses specific traits such as communication abilities, demeanour, empathy and sympathy. Immediately after each MI, the interviewers rank every applicant between 1 and 7, with 7 as the “most appropriate” response and 1 as “least appropriate.” If a candidate scores high in one session and very low in another, the overall effect in their calibrated score is minimal, Gardner says.

Of nine other dentistry schools in Canada, four use the MI process, four use the Canadian Dental Association standard structured interview, and one uses a semi-structured format, Gardner says. The standard process involves situational or behavioural questions from two to three trained interviewers, each question designed to assess one of seven competencies: communication, conscientiousness, integrity, judgment and analysis, self-control, sensitivity to others, and tact and diplomacy. In a survey of 48 successful UBC DMD applicants that Gardner conducted, they overwhelmingly preferred the MI over a standard panel interview, saying the former was more fair and reliable.

“If they [applicants] blow it on one session, they can make it up in another,” she says. “In a

standard interview, if you get off on the wrong foot with the interviewers or they take a dislike to you, you’re sunk.”

For structured interviews, students can see previous questions posted on Facebook and can take courses to prepare, Gardner adds. But applicants can’t study for, or cheat on, MI scenarios used for DMD admissions at UBC: she, the dean and the admissions committee write 24 new ones each year.

“With regular interviews, it’s so easy to rehearse your answers,” says Kaitlin Olson (DMD 2017), who went through the MI process at UBC in 2013. She found most of the scenarios “very straightforward” and adds, “They [interviewers] got a fairly good sense of who I was.”

Kiavash Hossini (DMD 2017), who also went through the MI process at UBC in 2013, says he prefers it to the standardized approach. “If you don’t connect with one interviewer, you have other chances. You can talk to other people. [With MI] they look for more aspects of a person.”

The Admissions Open House

Impressive digital technology and spectacular scenery can certainly “wow” applicants at the DMD Admissions open house. But ultimately, UBC Dentistry’s people and culture win the hearts of top students.

“I hear from applicants: ‘This is the only place where we’ve really felt welcome,’” says Dr. David Sweet OC, who serves as open house emcee. “‘You care. At other places, we’re treated like a number.’” Many of UBC Dentistry’s potential candidates have also applied to schools across North America and Australia.

A fan of forensics and related TV shows, Kiavash Hossini (DMD 2017) says that Dr. Sweet’s “awesome,” “one-of-a-kind” speech at the open house helped him decide to make UBC Dentistry his first choice. “He talked about how they managed to solve a case by the bite imprint on a piece of cheese left at a crime scene.” As an architect, Hossini also said he appreciated the multiple walls of windows, natural lighting and venting at UBC’s Nobel Biocare Oral Health Centre.



Dr. Karen Gardner

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Dental Hygiene Following Suit

Like good dentists, dental hygienists also need excellent people skills beyond high test scores, professional abilities and knowledge. They, too, need to see a patient as a whole person, rather than just a mouth of teeth to be cleaned or fixed.

To help assess these qualities, UBC Dentistry’s bachelor degree program in dental hygiene began offering mini interviews for its final candidates in 2015.

These are available two ways: Those who choose the entry-to-practice option (four years on campus) are interviewed in person. Registered dental hygienists seeking to complete their degree, or students who want to complete their degree off campus, are interviewed via Skype. The latter form of interview began in April of this year, conducted by clinical associate professor Penny Hatzimanolakis.

“All the other dental clinics [where he interviewed] were just four walls with a chair, no windows.”

To thoroughly inform short-listed candidates, UBC Dentistry began hosting a two-day DMD admissions open house in 2007. This year, there were 96 final applicants; each of three such events held over consecutive weekends in late January and early February was attended by 32 applicants.

On day one, each applicant (with up to two guests) not only hears from the dean and faculty members, but listens to reflections and feedback from first-year students and recent DMD graduates. Three dentistry faculty volunteers provide guided tours of the oral health centre and campus. Applicants visit the computer learning centre and interact with undergraduates working in research labs. During lunch hosted by the dental undergrad society, applicants can meet with representatives of financial institutions. The dean provides a candid presentation on what costs DMD students can expect and what expenses these cover.

On day two, applicants only are invited. They attend problem-based learning sessions in the morning and multiple mini interviews in the afternoon. To help them get ready for these important events, faculty give two separate PowerPoint presentations on day

one. Students learn their role in the process, see a schematic of the interview rooms and receive hints and reassurance.

Sweet says he encourages applicants to approach any dentistry student during the open house and ask them what it’s like in the Faculty. He advises current students to be as honest as possible. After all, the Faculty’s open house is based on the principle of “informed consent,” he says—just as UBC Dentistry rigorously explains a dental procedure, including its risks and benefits, to patients before they agree to treatment. The open house gives as much valuable information as possible to help would-be students make the best choice for them.

This approach has paid off, says Vicki Koulouris, UBC Dentistry’s manager of Admissions. “Since we started doing the open house, we have had significantly more applicants, who were accepted elsewhere as well as by us, choose to come to UBC Dentistry. We’ve seen a huge difference—the number of ‘drops’ have dropped a lot.”

For each open house, 21 UBC Dentistry staff, students and work-study volunteers ensure that activities operate efficiently and on time.