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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN CHILE

Barreras en la investigación de pacientes especiales en Chile

Lorena Mirtala Orellana Salazar.[1]

1. Departamento de Prevención y Salud Pública Odontológica, Facultad de Odontología, Universidad de Concepción, Chile.

Clinical practice and research play a key role in ensuring high-quality university-level instruction in dentistry. Research, in particular, enables continuous assessment of whether the content delivered to both undergraduate and graduate students remains up-to-date and relevant. This is especially important in the case of patients with special needs, a highly vulnerable population that includes individuals with disabilities and/or complex medical conditions.

However, what happens when, in Chile, despite the evident lack of studies to guide and support quality clinical care, researchers face increasing barriers to conducting studies involving patients with special needs? They must obtain multiple permits, secure approval from several Bioethics Committees, and complete numerous forms —not only themselves but also patients and other involved parties. This process is time-consuming, exhausting, and frustrating for both the research team and the participants, including the patients themselves.

The growing number of barriers means that most studies currently feasible in Chile are mainly limited to bibliographic reviews, retrospective studies of medical records, and database research. But what happens to clinical scientific evidence (the evidence that enables us to identify patients' oral health needs, assess their conditions, and develop management strategies that facilitate their care in the dental chair)? This type of evidence is not only essential for teaching but is also crucial for decision-making regarding public policies in our country.

We are increasingly surrounded by regulations and laws that, in theory, should help us, but in practice often hinder our progress as a society. In my view, we are creating our

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Corresponding Author: Lorena Orellana. Facultad de Odontología, Universidad de Concepción, Chile. Avenida Roosevelt 1550, Concepción, Chile. **E-mail: lorenaorellana@udec.cl**

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own barriers, which only obstruct the development of high-quality research involving these patient populations. As a result, researchers, especially young ones, become discouraged and, in many cases, consider seeking new horizons where they can bring their ideas to life and carry out studies that truly contribute to improving the quality of life of people with special needs.

I simply ask that we make a collective effort —universities, public and private institutions— to focus on what truly matters: our patients. They need us to propose solutions to their needs, not the other way around. Of course, I fully agree on the importance of upholding ethical standards, but we must find ways to facilitate this work without compromising rigor.