






Reply to the letter to the editor “Impact of perceived stress in Odontology students: a university challenge”, by Huarcaya-Hurtado et al. (2023)

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Dear Editor:

We thank Huarcaya-Hurtado et al. (1) for the analysis presented in their letter to the editor titled “Impact of perceived stress among Dentistry students: a university challenge”, published in Number 2 of the 2024 edition (April-June) of the prestigious *Revista Estomatológica Herediana*. We value the comments and agree that stress among dental students represents a public health challenge in the academic training of this discipline, as mentioned in the letter.

As the authors point out, stress is a multifactorial phenomenon that was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, where factors related to demanding academic training, health uncertainty, confinement, task overload, emotional difficulties and financial and family issues played a crucial role (2, 3). We agree that symptoms of mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, poor sleep quality and mental exhaustion should be addressed with the seriousness they deserve, as they significantly impact students’ personal well-being and academic performance (4).

The results obtained in our study (5), which reveal that six out of ten dentistry students experience high levels of stress, are consistent with previous findings of cross-sectional research studies conducted in different contexts and countries (6, 7). It is worth mentioning that the classification of students based on the median obtained was a decision grounded in the pursuit of establishing a clear threshold for the identification of high stress levels (8). However, we acknowledge that the choice of this summary measure can be seen as an arbitrary criterion, since the

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Perceived Stress Scale of 14 items is not a diagnostic instrument. Therefore, we suggest that future research establishes robust and standardized criteria that may or may not influence the distribution of the phenomenon.

By its nature, stress is a dynamic variable dependent on the context and the experiential situation of each individual. In this sense, stress levels in a student fluctuate based on factors such as academic workload, personal events, or even the moment of the semester (9). Since these fluctuations are expected and natural, a cross-sectional study, despite obtaining a measurement at a specific point in time, is representative of the reality students face in that context. Although longitudinal studies could monitor these changes over time (10), if the goal is to identify specific and general stressors, the cross-sectional approach remains a valid and effective method for formulating intervention strategies that adapt to immediate needs.

Therefore, we join the suggestion to explore and test effective stress management interventions in this population group, aiming to implement preventive and mental health promotion programs from the early stages of stress. As researchers point out, it would be beneficial for academic institutions to establish proactive measures to mitigate stress in its early stages (1). The promotion of mental health and the development of early intervention strategies are essential to ensuring a healthier and more sustainable academic environment for students (11). The results of our study promoted teacher training, effective communication channels with regular tutoring sessions, academic workload modification and rapid referral to mental health services in the institution (5). We remain committed to addressing this issue and hope that our work inspires future research and actions within both public and private universities to comprehensively tackle stress among dental students.

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