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REVIEW ARTICLE

Dental Stem Cells: Global Advances and Indian Contributions: An Expanded Narrative Review

Ravada Kinneresh[1], Yellanti Doondi Dinesh Nag[2], Mohammed Rabia Basreen[3]

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ABSTRACT

Background: Dental stem cells (DSCs), residing within various oral tissues, have surged to the forefront of regenerative medicine due to their unique accessibility, multipotency, and immunomodulatory properties, offering promising alternatives to traditional grafting techniques in dentistry and potential for systemic applications.

Aim: This comprehensive review critically analyses the current global advancements and clinical translation of DSC therapies, with a specific focus on evaluating the evolving research landscape, contributions, challenges, and future potential within India.

Objectives: To systematically categorize DSC types, their specific niches, molecular signatures, and differentiation capabilities.

- To compare the volume, focus, and impact of global versus Indian DSC research outputs and clinical trials.
- To synthesize evidence on clinical outcomes, efficacy, and safety of DSC-based therapies across various applications.
- To identify key translational barriers (scientific, infrastructural, regulatory, economic) globally and specifically within India.
- To propose concrete strategies and future directions for accelerating DSC research and clinical adoption, particularly in the Indian context.

Material: A detailed narrative review synthesizing findings from recent (2000-2025) global and Indian literature. Comprehensive searches were conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Cochrane Library, and regional databases (e.g., IndMed).

AUTHOR'S AFFILIATION:

[1] Assistant Resident Medical Officer, Department of Public Health Dentistry, Great Eastern Medical School and Hospital, Ragolu, Andhra Pradesh, India.

[2] Senior Consultant, Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Dr. NTR University of Health Sciences, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India..

[3] Junior Resident, Graduate, Dr. NTR University of Health Sciences, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Ravada Kinneresh, Assistant Resident Medical Officer, Department of Public Health Dentistry, Great Eastern Medical School and Hospital, Ragolu, Andhra Pradesh, India.

E-mail: rk10121964@gmail.com

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Inclusion criteria encompassed original research articles (in vitro, in vivo, clinical), systematic reviews, meta-analyses, clinical trial registries, conference proceedings, and reports from key institutions. Both human and preclinical studies were considered.

Result: DPSCs and SHED demonstrate significant efficacy in preclinical models and emerging clinical trials for pulp-dentin complex regeneration, periodontal tissue engineering, bone augmentation, and neural repair. Global research is characterized by robust funding, advanced infrastructure, and progression into Phase II/III trials for specific indications. Indian research output is increasing quantitatively, focusing on cost-effective scaffolds, neural differentiation, and preclinical validation, but faces significant hurdles in translation due to infrastructural gaps, funding limitations, regulatory complexities, and lack of standardized protocols. Emerging technologies like exosome therapy, gene editing, and 3D bioprinting integrated with DSCs show immense future potential.

Conclusion: DSCs represent a paradigm shift towards biological solutions in regenerative dentistry and medicine, with substantial global progress validating their therapeutic potential. India is emerging as a notable contributor in foundational research but lags in clinical translation. Realizing the full potential of DSCs in India necessitates urgent and concerted efforts in establishing standardized GMP facilities, enhancing funding mechanisms, streamlining ethical-regulatory pathways, fostering interdisciplinary and international collaborations, and investing in clinician-scientist training and public awareness.

KEYWORDS

• Dental Stem Cells • DPSCs • SHED • PDLSCs • SCAP • DFPCs • Regenerative Dentistry • Periodontal Regeneration • Pulp Regeneration • Tissue Engineering • Stem Cell Therapy • Clinical Translation • Regenerative Medicine India • Global Health • Translational Barriers • Exosomes • 3D Bioprinting

Key Message: Dental stem cells have transitioned from experimental curiosities to clinically relevant therapeutic agents with transformative potential for both dental and systemic regeneration. While global research is advancing towards wider clinical adoption, India shows promising growth in basic and applied research but requires strategic investments in infrastructure, standardization, regulation, and translation to bridge the gap and become a significant player in affordable, advanced regenerative therapies.

INTRODUCTION

Regenerative medicine seeks to restore the structure and function of damaged tissues and organs, moving beyond palliative care to true biological restoration. Within this dynamic field, mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) have been pivotal, sourced traditionally from bone marrow and adipose tissue. However, the discovery of potent stem cells within readily accessible dental tissues has opened a new, highly promising frontier. Dental Stem Cells (DSCs), first definitively characterized in the dental pulp by Gronthos *et al*. in 2000, possess remarkable self-renewal capacity, multilineage differentiation potential (including osteogenic, odontogenic, chondrogenic, adipogenic, neurogenic, and myogenic lineages), potent immunomodulatory properties, and, crucially, are relatively easy to obtain with minimal morbidity during routine dental procedures like extractions or from naturally exfoliated deciduous teeth.

The limitations of conventional dental treatments such as autografts (requiring a second surgical site), allografts (risk of immune rejection and disease transmission), and synthetic biomaterials (lack of biological integration and limited regenerative capacity) have been a major impetus for exploring DSC-based therapies. DSCs offer the potential for true regeneration: restoring the natural pulp-dentin complex in endodontics, rebuilding the functional periodontal apparatus in periodontitis, generating viable bone for augmentation, and even repairing craniofacial defects. Furthermore, their low immunogenicity makes them suitable for both autologous and potentially allogeneic applications. The parallel rise of stem cell banking, particularly for SHED (Stem cells from Human Exfoliated Deciduous teeth), has added a preventive and future oriented dimension to pediatric dental care, especially in urban centers globally and increasingly in India.

Beyond dentistry, research has revealed the surprising systemic potential of DSCs. Their ability to differentiate into neural like cells, cardiomyocytes, insulin producing cells, and hepatocyte like cells in vitro and in preclinical models suggests applications in treating neurodegenerative diseases, cardiac infarction, diabetes, and liver disorders. This broader potential significantly elevates the importance of DSC research. The field has evolved rapidly from initial in vitro characterization through sophisticated in vivo animal models to an increasing number of human clinical trials worldwide.

India, with its vast population, high burden of dental diseases, burgeoning biotechnology sector, and strong base in fundamental biological sciences, holds significant potential to contribute to and benefit from DSC therapies. Indian research output in this field is demonstrably increasing, primarily in foundational science and preclinical studies. However, translating this research into clinically available, safe, effective, and affordable therapies faces unique challenges within the Indian context.

This comprehensive narrative review aims to:

1. Provide a detailed overview of the different types of DSCs, their sources, biological properties, and mechanisms of action.
2. Map the global landscape of DSC research, highlighting key advancements, leading regions/institutions, and major clinical trials.
3. Critically evaluate the current state of DSC research and development within India, identifying contributions and specific challenges.
4. Synthesize the current evidence on clinical applications and outcomes.
5. Discuss emerging technologies enhancing DSC potential (exosomes, gene editing, bioprinting).
6. Analyze the ethical and regulatory frameworks.
7. Propose concrete strategies to overcome translational barriers, particularly focusing on accelerating progress in India towards realizing the immense therapeutic promise of dental stem cells.

Types and Sources of Dental Stem Cells: Biology and Potential

The oral cavity harbors a rich reservoir of mesenchymal stem cell populations within specific niches of various developing and mature tissues. While sharing core MSC characteristics (plastic adherence, specific surface marker expression - CD73+, CD90+, CD105+, CD34-, CD45-, HLA-DR-), different DSC types exhibit unique properties, differentiation biases, and therapeutic potentials dictated by their tissue of origin and niche microenvironment. Understanding these nuances is crucial for selecting the optimal DSC source for specific regenerative applications.

- Dental Pulp Stem Cells (DPSCs): Isolated from the pulp tissue of permanent teeth, DPSCs represent the most extensively studied DSC population. Discovered by Gronthos *et al*., they originate from the cranial neural crest. DPSCs exhibit high proliferative rates and robust multilineage differentiation potential. They are particularly adept at forming dentin like and pulp-like tissues, making them prime candidates for regenerative endodontics (pulp revitalization/regeneration). Their strong osteogenic potential also supports applications in bone regeneration (e.g., alveolar ridge augmentation, sinus lifts, repair of craniofacial defects). DPSCs also demonstrate significant neurogenic differentiation capacity, contributing to research in peripheral nerve repair and central nervous system disorders. Their immunomodulatory effects, mediated through paracrine signaling and direct cell contact, are well-documented. Harvesting typically occurs during routine extractions (e.g., third molars) or therapeutic extractions, often with prior patient consent for research or banking.
- Stem Cells from Human Exfoliated Deciduous Teeth (SHED): Derived from the pulp of naturally shed primary teeth, SHED were first characterized by Miura

et al. in 2003. SHED share similarities with DPSCs but display even higher proliferation rates, increased population doublings, and greater osteogenic induction potential in some studies, despite being a more developmentally immature population. This makes them exceptionally valuable for regenerative applications requiring rapid cell expansion. SHED excel in craniofacial bone regeneration and show strong promise in neuroregeneration research (e.g., stroke, spinal cord injury models). Their source is non-invasive and ethically straightforward, as teeth are naturally lost. The establishment of SHED banking provides a unique opportunity for future autologous therapies, positioning pediatric dentistry at the forefront of preventive regenerative medicine.

- Periodontal Ligament Stem Cells (PDLSCs): Residing within the periodontal ligament (PDL) that anchors the tooth to the alveolar bone, PDLSCs were identified by Seo *et al*. in 2004. They exhibit a distinct differentiation bias towards cementoblast-like and periodontal ligament fibroblast-like cells. This lineage specificity makes PDLSCs the ideal candidate for regenerating the periodontal apparatus including the PDL itself, cementum, and alveolar bone which is the holy grail of periodontal therapy aiming to reverse periodontitis damage. Their potential for generating a functional "bio-root" complex is also actively investigated. Harvesting often occurs during extractions or periodontal surgeries involving tissue removal.
- Dental Follicle Progenitor Cells (DFPCs): Isolated from the dental follicle, a loose ectomesenchymal tissue surrounding the developing tooth germ, DFPCs are present prior to tooth eruption. They possess the potential to differentiate into cells forming the periodontium, including cementoblasts, osteoblasts, and PDL fibroblasts. Consequently, DFPCs are primarily investigated for periodontal tissue engineering and bio-root development strategies, leveraging their inherent role in natural tooth support formation. Their source is typically impacted third molars or other developing teeth requiring extraction.
- Stem Cells from the Apical Papilla (SCAP): Located at the apex of developing permanent teeth (before root closure), SCAP were described by Sonoyama *et al*. in 2006. This tissue, rich in progenitor cells, contributes to root dentin formation. SCAP exhibit high proliferative potential, strong telomerase activity (suggesting longevity), and potent regenerative capacity, particularly for the pulp-dentin complex. They are considered crucial for regenerative endodontic procedures (REPs) in immature permanent teeth with necrotic pulps (apexogenesis/revascularization), where they can potentially complete root development. SCAP are typically harvested from extracted immature teeth (e.g., for orthodontic reasons).

Harvesting, Isolation, and Banking: DSC isolation commonly involves enzymatic digestion (e.g., collagenase/dispase) of the harvested tissue, followed by culture expansion. Magnetic or fluorescence-activated cell sorting (MACS/FACS) can be used for enrichment based on surface markers, though the stromal cell adhesion method remains standard. Cryopreservation techniques allow long-term storage of DSCs in liquid nitrogen within specialized stem cell banks. This is particularly relevant for SHED banking, enabling families to store cells from a child's exfoliated teeth for potential future autologous use. The establishment of reliable, GMP-compliant banking facilities is critical for the clinical translation of DSC therapies, especially for allogeneic approaches.

Mechanisms of Action: The therapeutic effects of DSCs are mediated through two primary, often synergistic, mechanisms:

8. Cell Differentiation and Direct Tissue Replacement: Transplanted DSCs can differentiate into specific cell types (odontoblasts, osteoblasts, cementoblasts, neurons, etc.) and directly contribute to the formation of new functional tissue within the defect site.
9. Paracrine Signaling and Trophic Effects: DSCs secrete a vast array of bioactive molecules, including growth factors (VEGF, FGF, IGF, BDNF, NGF), cytokines, chemokines, and extracellular vesicles

(exosomes, microvesicles). This secretome exerts potent effects:

- Immunomodulation: Suppressing pro-inflammatory cytokines (TNF-α, IFN-γ, IL-6), promoting anti-inflammatory cytokines (IL-10), and modulating T-cell, B-cell, dendritic cell, and macrophage activity to create a pro-regenerative microenvironment.
- Angiogenesis: Stimulating the formation of new blood vessels (via VEGF, FGF) to enhance oxygen and nutrient supply to the regenerating tissue.
- Anti-apoptosis: Promoting survival of endogenous cells at the injury site.
- Chemotaxis: Recruiting endogenous stem/progenitor cells to participate in repair.
- Anti-microbial Effects: Some secreted factors exhibit direct antibacterial properties.
- Modulation of Fibrosis: Reducing scar tissue formation.

The recognition of the critical role of the paracrine secretome, particularly exosomes, has led to the exploration of cell-free therapies. These offer potential advantages by avoiding risks associated with direct cell transplantation (e.g., tumorigenicity, immunogenicity, cell survival issues) while harnessing the beneficial trophic effects.

Global Research Landscape: Drivers, Leaders, and Applications

The global DSC research ecosystem is characterized by significant investment, advanced infrastructure, interdisciplinary collaboration (dentistry, biology, engineering, materials science), and a clear trajectory towards clinical application. Research focus and leadership vary by region, often driven by national priorities, funding mechanisms, and technological strengths.

- North America (USA & Canada): A powerhouse in DSC research, driven by strong National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding, pioneering academic institutions, and active biotechnology involvement. Key areas include:
  - Regenerative Endodontics: Leading research on autologous pulp regeneration using DPSCs/SCAP, often combined with optimized scaffolds and growth factor delivery systems. Institutions like the Forsyth Institute, University of Southern California, and University of Pennsylvania are prominent.
  - Bone and Periodontal Regeneration: Advanced studies on DPSCs, PDLSCs, and SHED for periodontal defects, alveolar bone augmentation, and maxillofacial reconstruction, integrating novel biomaterials and delivery techniques.
  - Neuroregeneration: Exploring DSC secretome (especially exosomes) and differentiated cells for spinal cord injury, peripheral nerve repair, and neurodegenerative models.
  - Systemic Applications: Investigating DSC potential in diabetes, myocardial infarction, and autoimmune diseases. Several Phase I/II clinical trials are active or completed, particularly for pulp regeneration and periodontal applications.
- Europe: Features diverse research strengths across multiple countries with significant EU framework program funding supporting collaborative networks. Key areas include:
  - Standardization & Manufacturing: Focus on developing GMP-compliant protocols for DSC isolation, expansion, and banking (e.g., UK, Germany, Sweden).
  - Biomaterials & Scaffold Engineering: Advanced research in bioactive scaffolds (natural/synthetic polymers, ceramics) tailored for specific DSC delivery and differentiation (e.g., Italy, Switzerland, Netherlands).
  - Clinical Translation: Several centers are conducting early-phase clinical trials, particularly for periodontal regeneration and bone augmentation. Strong emphasis on regulatory science and ethical frameworks.
- East Asia (Japan, South Korea, China): Characterized by rapid translation, significant government investment, and integration of cutting-edge technologies.

- Japan: A global leader in clinical translation. The landmark J-REPAIR trial (allogeneic SHED for ischemic stroke) demonstrated safety and promising efficacy signals in motor recovery, marking a significant leap into systemic neurology. Strong focus on tooth-derived organoids and cell sheet technology for pulp and periodontal regeneration without scaffolds. Institutions like Nagoya University and Hiroshima University are key players.
- South Korea: Excels in tissue engineering and periodontal regeneration trials, particularly utilizing SHED and PDLSCs with sophisticated scaffold designs. Seoul National University and Yonsei University are major centers. Active in commercialization efforts.
- China: Massive output in fundamental and applied research. Strong focus on scaffold-supported stem cell delivery, often incorporating nanotechnology (e.g., graphene oxide, nanohydroxyapatite) and growth factor functionalization. Large-scale preclinical studies and increasing clinical trial activity, especially in maxillofacial bone regeneration. Leading institutions include Peking University, Sichuan University, and Fourth Military Medical University.

- Other Regions: Australia (neuroregeneration, biomaterials), Brazil (clinical periodontology applications), and Israel (exosome research, immunomodulation) also make significant contributions.

Drivers of Global Progress: Success in these regions stems from: (1) Sustained Public Funding: Large grants from national agencies (NIH, EU FP, JSPS, NSFC) and ministries of health/science. (2) Advanced Infrastructure: State-of-the-art GMP facilities, core technology centers (imaging, genomics, biomaterials fabrication). (3) Robust Clinical Trial Networks: Efficient patient recruitment, multi-center collaborations, and streamlined ethics approvals. (4) Industry-Academia Partnerships: Strong links with biotech and pharma for development and commercialization. (5) Supportive Regulatory Pathways: Evolving but generally clearer frameworks for cell therapy development (e.g., EMA, FDA, PMDA pathways). (6) Interdisciplinary Culture: Seamless collaboration between dentists, biologists, engineers, and clinicians.

Indian Research Landscape: Growth, Focus, and Challenges

India's engagement with DSC research, while starting later than global leaders, has shown a significant quantitative increase in publications over the past decade, primarily driven by dental colleges, medical institutes, and emerging biotechnology hubs. The research profile reflects a blend of foundational science and pragmatic, resource-conscious innovation, yet faces substantial translational hurdles.

- Rese**arch** Focus and Contributions:
  - Preclinical Validation: A major focus is on demonstrating the efficacy of various DSCs (primarily DPSCs, SHED) in rodent and rabbit models for applications like pulp-dentin regeneration, periodontal defect healing, bone augmentation, and increasingly, neural repair (e.g., peripheral nerve injury, stroke models).
  - Cost-Effective Scaffold Development: Leveraging India's rich biodiversity and materials science expertise, significant effort is directed towards developing and characterizing scaffolds using natural polymers like chitosan (from crustacean shells), alginate (seaweed), silk fibroin, collagen, and plant-derived cellulose or starch. These are often explored as alternatives to expensive synthetic polymers or processed xenografts. Research focuses on optimizing their biocompatibility, degradation profiles, porosity, and ability to support DSC adhesion, proliferation, and differentiation.
  - Characterization and Differentiation Studies: Indian labs are actively characterizing the biological properties of DSCs sourced from the Indian population, investigating their differentiation potential under various culture conditions and growth factor cocktails, and comparing them to other MSC sources.

- Exploring Combinatorial Therapies: Research explores synergies between DSCs and growth factors (e.g., BMPs, PDGF), low-level laser therapy (LLLT), or platelet concentrates (PRP, PRF) to enhance regenerative outcomes.
- Emerging Areas: Initial forays into DSC-derived exosomes for regenerative applications and understanding their cargo are beginning. Exploration of gene editing (CRISPR-Cas9) concepts, though largely theoretical or in very early stages within India.

- Leading Institutions: Key contributors include:
  - All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi: Pioneering work in DSC biology, neural differentiation, and preclinical models.
  - Manipal College of Dental Sciences/ Manipal Academy of Higher Education: Strong focus on SHED, DPSCs, scaffold development, and periodontal regeneration research.
  - SRM Institute of Science and Technology (Chennai): Active in DSC isolation, characterization, biomaterials, and tissue engineering.
  - Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh: Research on DSCs for bone and craniofacial applications.
  - National Centre for Cell Science (NCCS), Pune: Expertise in stem cell biology and banking, including DSCs.
  - Several Government and Private Dental Colleges: Contributing through postgraduate research projects and smaller-scale studies.
- Key Challenges Impeding Translation: Despite growing research output, the path from lab to clinic in India is fraught with obstacles:
  - Infrastructural Deficits: A critical shortage of GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice)-compliant cell processing facilities and accredited stem cell banks. Most research relies on research-grade labs unsuitable for clinical-grade cell production. Lack of advanced core facilities (e.g., high-end flow cytometry, confocal microscopy, animal imaging).
  - Funding Limitations: Relatively low public funding for translational biomedical research compared to global leaders. Heavy reliance on limited university grants or private funding, which is often insufficient for the long, expensive path of cell therapy development. Difficulty attracting large-scale venture capital for high-risk regenerative medicine ventures.
  - Regulatory Ambiguity and Complexity: The regulatory landscape for stem cell therapies in India, governed primarily by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI), has been historically complex and perceived as restrictive or unclear. While guidelines exist (New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019; ICMR National Guidelines for Stem Cell Research, 2017), navigating the approval process for clinical trials, especially for minimally manipulated cells versus more-than-minimally manipulated products, remains challenging, time-consuming, and discouraging for many researchers. Ethical review processes can be inconsistent.
  - Lack of Standardization: Significant variability in protocols for DSC isolation, expansion, characterization, and quality control across different Indian labs. This hinders reproducibility, comparability of results, and ultimately, regulatory approval and clinical adoption. Lack of national reference cell lines or standardized reagents.
  - Limited Clinical Trial Expertise: Relatively few centers have extensive experience in designing, conducting, and managing complex cell therapy clinical trials according to international standards (GCP). Challenges in patient recruitment,

long-term follow-up, and data management.

- Skilled Workforce Gap: Shortage of highly trained personnel with expertise spanning advanced cell culture techniques, GMP operations, regulatory affairs specific to cell therapies, and clinical trial management.
- Commercialization Barriers: Weak links between academia and industry in the regenerative medicine space. Limited domestic biotech companies focused on advanced cell therapies. Challenges in scaling up production, establishing distribution logistics, and achieving cost-effectiveness for the Indian market.

- Emerging Initiatives: Recognizing these challenges, positive steps are emerging:
  - Efforts by ICMR and DCGI to refine and clarify regulatory pathways for cell-based products.
  - Initiatives by institutions (e.g., NCCS, AIIMS) and private companies to establish biobanking facilities, though widespread GMP compliance is still evolving.
  - Increasing international collaborations between Indian researchers and global centers.
  - Government schemes (e.g., BIRAC) providing some funding for innovation, though more targeted support for translational regenerative medicine is needed.

Clinical Outcomes and Evidence Synthesis

The therapeutic promise of DSCs is increasingly being evaluated in human clinical trials. While large-scale Phase III trials are still limited, accumulating evidence from early-phase trials, case series, and systematic reviews/ meta-analyses provides valuable insights into safety and efficacy.

- Periodontal Regeneration:
  - Applications: Treatment of intrabony defects, furcation involvements, and gingival recession.
  - Cell Sources: PDLSCs are the most logical choice, but DPSCs and SHED are also widely investigated due to availability. Autologous cells are predominantly used.
  - Delivery: Typically combined with scaffolds (collagen, synthetic polymers, bone grafts) or using cell sheet technology, often applied during flap surgery.
  - Outcomes: Meta-analyses (e.g., Nguyen-Thi *et al*., 2023; Sun *et al*., 2023) consistently report statistically significant improvements in key clinical parameters compared to conventional therapies (open flap debridement, bone grafts alone, guided tissue regeneration - GTR) or placebo:
    - Greater Clinical Attachment Level (CAL) gain (primary indicator of functional regeneration).
    - Reduced Probing Depth (PD).
    - Increased radiographic bone fill/ defect bone fill.
    - Less gingival recession increase.
  - Evidence Level: Moderate to high certainty evidence for superiority of DSC-based approaches over conventional methods in improving CAL and bone fill for intrabony defects. Outcomes for furcations and recession are promising but based on fewer studies. Long-term stability data (beyond 1-2 years) is still accumulating. Safety profiles are generally favorable, with adverse events similar to conventional surgery (swelling, pain, infection risk).
- Pulp Regeneration / Revitalization:
  - Applications: Immature permanent teeth with necrotic pulps (apexogenesis), mature teeth (pulp revitalization), potentially replacing conventional root canal treatment.
  - Cell Sources: SCAP is the ideal source due to its location and role, but DPSCs and SHED are also used. Autologous cells (if banked) or allogeneic cells are being explored. Crucially, many clinical protocols rely on recruiting endogenous stem cells (likely including SCAP remnants or periapical MSCs) via evoked bleeding and scaffold placement

("cell-homing" approach), rather than exogenous cell transplantation.

- Delivery: In cell transplantation trials, cells are seeded onto scaffolds (collagen, synthetic polymers) and placed into the disinfected root canal system. The cell-homing approach uses scaffolds (often collagen) impregnated with growth factors (e.g., bFGF, BMPs) to attract endogenous cells.
- Outcomes:
  - Exogenous Cell Trials: Early trials (e.g., Liu *et al.*, 2024 - autologous DPSCs) demonstrate feasibility, safety, and the ability to regenerate vascularized pulp-like tissue, sometimes with continued root development (apexogenesis) and regaining of positive vitality testing (sensitivity) in some cases. Long-term functional data is limited.
  - Cell-Homing Approach (Clinical Standard): Widely adopted clinically (REPs). Evidence shows high success rates in promoting root development (thickening walls, apical closure) and resolution of periapical lesions in immature teeth. Reports of regained vitality sensation are variable and not fully understood mechanistically (possible reinnervation vs. pulp regeneration). Outcomes in mature teeth are less predictable than in immature teeth. Meta-analyses confirm good outcomes for lesion healing and root development in immature teeth.
- Evidence Level: Strong evidence for the clinical efficacy of REPs (cell-homing) in immature teeth for promoting root development and healing lesions. Evidence for true pulp regeneration and regained vitality, especially with exogenous cells or in mature teeth, is promising but still emerging, primarily from early-phase trials and case series. Safety is generally good.

- Bone Tissue Engineering:
  - Applications: Alveolar ridge augmentation, sinus floor elevation, repair of craniofacial defects (e.g., post-trauma, post-resection), periodontal bone defects.
  - Cell Sources: DPSCs and SHED are most common due to strong osteogenic potential. Autologous use is typical.
  - Delivery: Seeded onto osteoconductive scaffolds (hydroxyapatite, tricalcium phosphate, bioglass, natural/ synthetic polymers) and implanted into the defect site.
  - Outcomes: Preclinical data overwhelmingly supports enhanced bone formation, mineralization, vascularization, and osseointegration of implants placed in DSC-scaffold constructs compared to scaffolds alone. Clinical trials and case series demonstrate feasibility, safety, and promising results showing increased bone volume, density, and accelerated healing compared to traditional bone grafts or scaffolds alone. However, large, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) definitively proving superiority over established bone augmentation techniques are still needed. Systematic reviews highlight the potential but call for more high-quality clinical data.
  - Evidence Level: Robust preclinical evidence. Clinical evidence is promising but primarily from small trials and case series, warranting larger RCTs for definitive conclusions on efficacy and comparison to gold standards.
- Neurological Applications:
  - Applications: Ischemic stroke, spinal cord injury, peripheral nerve injury.
  - Cell Sources: Primarily SHED and DPSCs, valued for neurogenic potential and paracrine effects. Allogeneic approaches are prominent (e.g., J-REPAIR).
  - Delivery: Intravenous infusion or direct injection into the affected area (brain, spinal cord, nerve conduit).

- Outcomes: The J-REPAIR trial (Yamamoto *et al*., 2023 - allogeneic SHED for chronic stroke) reported safety and significant improvements in motor function scores (Fugl-Meyer Assessment) compared to controls at 12 months, suggesting clinically meaningful recovery. Preclinical models consistently show neuroprotective effects, reduced inflammation, enhanced angiogenesis, and promotion of endogenous repair mechanisms leading to functional improvements. Clinical trials for other neurological indications are in earlier phases.
- Evidence Level: Preliminary but highly promising clinical evidence for stroke (J-REPAIR Phase I/II). Strong preclinical evidence across various neurological models. Safety data from trials is encouraging.

DISCUSSION

Synthesis, Emerging Horizons, and the Road Ahead

The trajectory of DSC research over the past two decades paints a picture of remarkable progress. From their initial identification as a novel MSC source within teeth, DSCs have matured into tangible therapeutic candidates actively being evaluated in human patients across the globe. The convergence of stem cell biology, advanced biomaterials, and tissue engineering principles is driving this evolution.

- Global Maturity and Diversification: Globally, DSC research has moved beyond basic characterization into sophisticated clinical translation. Key successes include:
    - Clinical Validation: Demonstrated safety and efficacy in controlled trials for periodontal regeneration and pulp revitalization (REPs), establishing these as the most mature applications.
    - Expanding Indications: Successful exploration beyond dentistry into neurology (J-REPAIR), ophthalmology (preclinical), and other systemic areas.
    - Technological Integration: Effective combination with scaffolds, growth factors, and advanced delivery systems (e.g., cell sheets, hydrogels).
    - Mechanistic Understanding: Recognition of the critical role of the paracrine secretome, particularly exosomes, opening avenues for cell-free therapies.
    - Standardization Efforts: Development of better protocols for isolation, expansion, characterization, and quality control, improving reproducibility.
- India's Position: Potential Amidst Challenges: India's contribution is characterized by significant growth in foundational research, particularly in preclinical validation and innovative, cost-effective biomaterial solutions leveraging local resources. Areas like neural differentiation and combinatorial therapies show promise. However, the transition to clinical impact remains elusive due to the profound translational barriers outlined earlier (infrastructure, funding, regulation, standardization, skilled workforce). While publications increase, the absence of significant Phase II/III clinical trials originating from India highlights the gap. Initiatives towards biobanking and regulatory refinement are positive but need acceleration and scale.
- Emerging Technologies Reshaping the Field: Several cutting-edge areas hold immense promise for enhancing DSC therapies:
    - Exosome and Secretome Therapy: DSC-derived exosomes encapsulate miRNAs, proteins, and lipids that mediate many regenerative effects. Their exploration offers a "cell-free" approach, potentially overcoming challenges of cell survival, engraftment, immunogenicity, tumorigenicity, and storage/distribution. Preclinical success in myocardial infarction, spinal cord injury, osteoarthritis, and dental regeneration is driving intense research and early-stage clinical translation globally. India is

beginning fundamental research in this area.

- Gene Editing (CRISPR-Cas9 and beyond): Precision editing of DSC genomes holds potential to enhance their therapeutic properties – boosting differentiation potential (e.g., towards specific neural subtypes or insulin-producing cells), increasing homing efficiency to injury sites, enhancing secretion of therapeutic factors, or providing resistance to hostile microenvironments (e.g., inflammation in periodontitis). While largely preclinical, this represents a powerful future direction. Indian research is in very early conceptual/ exploratory stages.
- 3D Bioprinting: This technology allows precise deposition of DSCs, biomaterials ("bioinks"), and growth factors layer-by-layer to create complex, patient-specific tissue constructs (e.g., vascularized pulp tissue, precisely shaped bone grafts, periodontal ligament-bone interfaces). It addresses the challenge of replicating intricate tissue architectures. Global research is advancing rapidly; Indian institutions are starting to explore bioprinting, potentially integrating cost-effective natural bioinks.
- Biomimetic and Smart Scaffolds: Development of scaffolds that dynamically interact with cells and the host environment. These include scaffolds responsive to pH, temperature, or enzymes; those releasing growth factors in a controlled spatiotemporal manner; and nanostructured surfaces designed to mimic the extracellular matrix and direct specific cell behaviors (differentiation, migration). Indian research on natural polymer-based scaffolds aligns well with this trend.
- Organoids and Microphysiological Systems: Growing DSCs into 3D mini-organ structures (e.g., "tooth-like" organoids, pulp organoids) provides powerful models for studying development, disease, drug screening, and potentially, sources of tissue for transplantation. This is an active global research area.

- Ethical and Regulatory Considerations: While DSCs avoid the major ethical controversies of embryonic stem cells, important issues remain:
  - Informed Consent: Particularly critical for pediatric SHED banking and research involving children. Ensuring parents/guardians fully understand long-term storage, potential uses, risks, and ownership.
  - Commercialization and Equity: Balancing innovation and profit with ensuring equitable access to potentially expensive therapies. Preventing exploitative marketing of unproven stem cell "treatments". The high cost of GMP manufacturing and therapy is a major barrier, especially in resource-limited settings like India.
  - Long-Term Safety: Continuous monitoring in clinical trials and post-marketing surveillance is essential to detect rare or long-term adverse effects (e.g., ectopic tissue formation, immunogenicity over time, potential tumorigenicity – though low for MSCs).
  - Regulatory Harmonization: Developing clear, risk-proportionate, and internationally harmonized regulatory pathways is vital for global progress. India needs to establish a predictable, efficient, and supportive regulatory framework specifically for cell and gene therapies, learning from international models while addressing domestic needs.
- Bridging the Translational Gap – Especially in India: Accelerating the journey of DSC therapies from bench to bedside, particularly within India, requires a multi-faceted, strategic approach:
  1. Invest in Infrastructure: Establish regional GMP manufacturing facilities for clinical-grade cell and exosome production. Upgrade core research facilities in key academic centers. Support the development of accredited stem cell biobanks.

2. Boost Funding: Significantly increase dedicated public funding for translational regenerative medicine research through agencies like DBT, DST, ICMR, and BIRAC. Create specific grant schemes for advanced therapy medicinal product (ATMP) development. Foster mechanisms to attract private investment and venture capital.
3. Streamline Regulation: Clarify and operationalize efficient regulatory pathways for DSC-based products (cell therapies, exosomes, gene-edited cells) through DCGI and ICMR. Establish a dedicated regulatory cell with expertise in ATMPs. Implement accelerated approval pathways for promising therapies addressing unmet needs. Ensure robust but efficient ethics review.
4. Enforce Standardization: Develop and disseminate national standard operating procedures (SOPs) for DSC isolation, expansion, characterization, and quality control. Establish national reference materials or cell banks. Promote accreditation of labs involved in clinical translation.
5. Build Capacity: Invest in training programs for scientists, clinicians, GMP specialists, regulatory affairs professionals, and clinical trial managers in the field of regenerative medicine. Foster interdisciplinary PhD and postdoctoral programs.
6. Foster Collaboration: Create national consortia bringing together academia, clinicians, industry, regulators, and patient groups. Significantly enhance international partnerships for knowledge transfer, joint research, and training. Establish national clinical trial networks for regenerative therapies.
7. Promote Industry: Academia Links: Develop incentives and frameworks (e.g., simplified IP policies, incubators) to encourage spin-offs and startups in the regenerative medicine sector. Facilitate partnerships between Indian researchers and both domestic and international biotech companies.
8. Enhance Clinical Research: Build capacity for designing and conducting high-quality GCP-compliant clinical trials in regenerative dentistry and medicine. Establish specialized clinical trial units within major dental/ medical institutes.
9. Public and Professional Engagement: Increase public awareness about the potential and realistic timelines of DSC therapies, and the importance of evidence-based treatments. Enhance training for dentists and physicians in regenerative principles and future therapies.

CONCLUSION

Dental stem cells have unequivocally emerged as a powerful and versatile tool in the regenerative medicine arsenal. Their journey from discovery within the pulp of extracted teeth to application in human clinical trials for conditions ranging from periodontitis to stroke exemplifies the remarkable potential of harnessing the body's intrinsic repair mechanisms. The global landscape showcases significant maturation, with validated clinical applications in dentistry and promising forays into systemic diseases, driven by interdisciplinary innovation, robust funding, and evolving regulatory support.

India stands at a crucial juncture. Its research community has demonstrated capability and growing output in foundational and preclinical DSC research, often showcasing ingenuity in resource-constrained settings, particularly in biomaterials development. However, the persistent translational gap – the chasm separating promising lab results from tangible patient benefit within India – remains the defining challenge. Overcoming this requires more than incremental progress; it demands a concerted national strategy addressing the critical bottlenecks: infrastructure (GMP facilities, biobanks), funding (substantial, sustained investment), regulation (clear, efficient pathways), standardization (national protocols), and workforce development (specialized training).

The integration of frontier technologies like exosome therapy, gene editing, and 3D bioprinting with DSCs offers unprecedented opportunities but also underscores the need for

India to accelerate its translational engine. By strategically investing in these areas, fostering collaboration, and streamlining the path from discovery to delivery, India has the potential not only to address its own significant burden of dental and systemic diseases with advanced, potentially more affordable regenerative solutions but also to emerge as a significant global contributor in this transformative field. The promise of dental stem cells is vast; realizing it fully, especially within diverse populations like India's, necessitates unwavering commitment and strategic action across the scientific, clinical, industrial, and regulatory spectrum. The time for focused investment in translating this potential into reality is now.

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