Refocus on the relevance and importance of dental health

A Short interview with Prof. Lakshman Samaranayake, Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry, University of Hong Kong

2012 is not the first time that an FDI congress is taking place in Hong Kong. Two years before the city's handover from Great Britain to China, dentists from all over the world gathered here for the 1995 Annual World Dental Congress. Worldental Daily had the opportunity to speak with the Dean of the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Dentistry, Prof. Lakshman Samaranayake, about the current state of dental health care in Hong Kong and what this year's congress might mean for HK dentistry.

I Worldental Daily: The last FDI congress in Hong Kong took place in 1995. What significant changes have taken place in HK dentistry over the last 17 years?

Prof. Lakshman Samaranayake: There have been incipient but decisive changes in Hong Kong dentistry. Particularly after 1997, when the territory was handed over to China, changes in the HK dental ecosystem could be seen both in the general provision of dental health care to the population, as well as in the education and training opportunities for dentists in Hong Kong.

As for the dental ecosystem in general, since the handover to China the executive-led HK government has paid little heed to dental health care for underserved populations and continued in the British style of administration, where an elite civil service was able to receive virtually free dental care, while the rest were exposed to the quirks of a private practice system, which the majority could not afford.

Recently, the government introduced a subsidised dental scheme, for the elderly in particular. However, the vestiges of colonial times remain, and free dentistry is still only available to civil servants. Being an exception, schoolchildren have benefited under both governments. The School Dental Service is generally well funded and regarded as a good service provider.

Apart from the younger population, where do Hong Kongers rank in the field of oral health?

As mentioned, the vast majority of the population is still in need of dental care, yet the demand is poor as in most Asian countries. The reasons for this may be the financial constraints of expensive dental care or general ignorance regarding the importance of dental health. Although Hong Kong does not have highly neglected oral care, compared with developed nations the dentist to population ratio of approximately 1 to 4,000 is rather low for the territory, which has long been considered a developed country.

One has to say that awareness of the benefits of good oral health is generally improving especially among the educated groups. The dentists in the territory, who deliver the major share of dental services, however, need to convey the message to the public that oral health is intimately related to systemic health and quality of life.

What can a major dental congress like FDI Hong Kong 2012 add to the improvement of dentistry in Hong Kong?

The focus and priority of the HK government has been on the general health rather than dental health of the populace. Fortunately, the new Chief Executive and President of the Executive Council of Hong Kong, Leung Chun-ying, is a friend and an ardent enthusiast of the dental profession, and we trust that under his leadership dental services will improve vastly and be given the recognition needed. The FDI’s Annual World Dental Congress will help to refocus the attention of both the government and the public on the relevance and importance of dental health.

Thank you very much for this interview.