Interview with Prof. Thomas Flemmig

Prof. Thomas Flemmig, the new Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry at The University of Hong Kong, tells Dr. Wong Chi Wai, Editor-in-Chief or the Newsletter Editorial Board, his life tale in dentistry as well as his perception, vision and mission of dental education when he assumed office on 1 July for a term of five years.

Q. Prof. Flemmig, on behalf of our Newsletter Editorial Board, I would like to express our warmest welcome to you as Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry at The University of Hong Kong. Can you share with us briefly your story leading to your current position at The University of Hong Kong?

Academic path in dentistry

After graduating from dental school, I started working in Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery at the University of Hamburg, Germany and then received training in Periodontology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I am specialized in Periodontology and have maintained a clinical practice throughout my career. I also obtained a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a certificate in Health Sector Management at Duke University, Durham, NC, U.S.A. I served as Chairman at the Departments of Periodontology at the Universities of Würzburg, Germany, Münster, Germany, and Washington, Seattle, WA, U.S.A. My research has focused on the control of oral biofilms and more recently, the economics of periodontal care.

How my academic path turned to the business side

What really brought me to the business side of dentistry and dental education was my experience from when I served on the Medical Committee of the Council of Science and Humanities in Germany, an independent body that makes recommendations to the federal and state governments on matters concerning education and research. The Council included members from academia, government, and industry who provided a broad range of views on how to organize and structure medical and dental education. During my service on the Council it became clear to me that some business practices could be applied to dental education. After all, we are not practicing or teaching in an ivory tower. We are teaching in a real world, where both, health care and financial needs are to be met.

Recent economic scenarios in dentistry

In a recent economic assessment, we evaluated the economics of oral biofilm-associated diseases such as caries and periodontal diseases in the U.S.A. We were surprised to find that national expenditures for the management of oral biofilm-associated diseases were greater than those for each of the most costly medical conditions including, cancer and cardiovascular conditions. These findings showed the relevance of the economic side of the services that we provide to our patients. We also looked at how new technologies can help us in patient care and education. That is an exciting field where we draw from various resources and opportunities...
outside of dentistry in order to improve patient care. I am convinced that technology will have a significant impact on how patients seek health care and how dentists interact with patients in the future.

Q. Prof. Flemmig, can you share with us your impression of the Faculty of Dentistry at The University of Hong Kong, in general and in terms of its academic performance and research excellence?

Under the leadership of Dean Prof. Samaranayake and Interim Dean Prof. Lo the Faculty of Dentistry has grown to become one of the premier teaching and research institutions in Asia that is recognized throughout the world. The staff of the Faculty is fantastic and produces internationally-renowned research in a variety of areas, in particular, biomedical engineering, infection and immunity, and public health. The research performance of the Faculty is outstanding.

Q. Prof. Flemmig, can you share with us your vision and mission and how you would fulfill the duty as Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry during your tenure?

Building upon existing strengths and excelling in an evolving economy

Our vision is to build upon the existing strengths of the Faculty, such as our broad based teaching and research programs, and using those strengths to expand our global impact and reach. Our mission embraces evidence-based clinical teaching in which we place an emphasis on preparing our students for lifelong learning. In this way, our graduates are ready to enter the market place, whether in private practice, government services or elsewhere. It is our goal to provide our graduates with the ability to adapt to an ever-changing and evolving environment. The needs and wants for oral health care follow changes in population demographics and economic wealth and will be influenced by innovations that change the practice of dentistry. Just think about how digital technologies have changed dentistry already. This trend will certainly continue.

Q. Prof. Flemmig, can you share with us your opinion on the current problem-based learning program? Have you heard comments of a possible problem of reduced competence when compared with traditional teaching?

Problem-based learning is one of many teaching methodologies. They all have their particular advantages and disadvantages. The Faculty of Dentistry at The University of Hong Kong is one of the few in the world that have fully embraced and implemented problem-based learning. It is important to note that the problem-based learning approach is mainly used for the didactical side of the undergraduate program. Our clinical training follows the traditional apprenticeship model with chair side clinical instruction. I am very interested in learning about possible “problems” with our current curriculum as our Faculty strives for excellence in all areas. We will carefully evaluate each component of our educational programs and make improvements wherever needed.
**Breadth versus depth**

Dental education has changed over the years. When I graduated, the spectrum of dentistry was significantly smaller compared with today. As the time in the undergraduate curriculum is finite, we need to make a choice between teaching every aspect of dentistry but to a limited extent, or sacrificing the breadth of subjects and in favor of more depth. So far we have focused on training entry-level dentists that are well-prepared to join the workforce. There is no question in my mind that dentists, just like any other professionals, need to continue learning throughout their professional career. This is why we encourage continuing education or postgraduate training for those who would like to become a specialist in one of the areas of dentistry. Dentistry has evolved from a purely technical discipline to a much more encompassing healthcare profession to which we at the University are adapting in order to best prepare our students for their professional career.

**Embracing modern teaching methodologies**

Teaching has gone through various phases and we have to be cognizant of the advantages and disadvantages of each system and opt for the one that fits best for dentistry. Going back to the “good old lectures”, only because we have been trained that way in the past, may not be a forward-looking solution. We would like to explore how we can further integrate technology and modern teaching methods into our programs. Already today, our undergraduate students actively engage with students from other universities in Asia, Europe and the United States to discuss relevant issues. This international exposure broadens the horizons of our students and is just one aspect of our 21st century teaching. It goes far beyond the dogmas taught in the old days and trains critical thinking.

Q. Prof. Flemmig, can you share with us how you view the possible inclusion of Special Care Dentistry targeting the elderly and people with intellectual disabilities into the teaching curriculum?

I think it is important to prepare our students for the changing needs of the people of Hong Kong. By the same token, one has to understand that by adding new components to our curriculum, we have to take out others. One cannot just keep on adding to the curriculum without considering the ramifications. I am very open to having a comprehensive discussion on this issue. One challenge will be the recruitment of teaching staff. The shortage of local dentists is not only limited to private practice and government services, it also extends to teaching staff. We increasingly need to broaden our search beyond the borders of Hong Kong in order to recruit talented staff. In academia, the job marketplace is global and we are competing for the brightest minds with other great universities around the world.

Q. Prof. Flemmig, can you give some general advice to our new dental graduates of 2014?

Our new graduates have chosen a wonderful and exciting profession. Dentistry offers many opportunities and caring for patients can be very rewarding. My advice is to never forget, in all that we do, to put patients first. Patients entrust us with their well-being and it is our moral and professional obligation to act always in their best interest. In addition, as dentistry and our profession continuously evolves we should never stop exploring and learning.

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