

# Message from the Dean and the Chairman of Dental Surgery

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The first course of Dental Surgery at the (Royal) University of Malta commenced in October of 1933 in the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery. Recognition of the Diploma in Dental Surgery by the General Medical Council of the UK was granted in 1936, a year before the end of the course. (The General Dental Council as a distinct regulatory body was established later). Dental Surgery became a Faculty, separate from Medicine and Surgery, in 1954. St. Luke's Hospital has since then also been designated a Dental Teaching Hospital.

The most serious problem facing the Department at this stage of development is the uncertainty associated with the move to the new hospital, We are scheduled to move in Phase Three- whenever that maybe.

## Undergraduate Training & the New Hospital

The University Dental Clinic, where students spend up to 80% of their time in the final three clinical years is physically part of the Dental Department St Luke's Hospital which provides routine dental care to patients and a specialist service in all branches of dentistry. Another major role of the Department is to provide dental treatment for medically compromised patients.

Delaying, by however many years, the move to the new hospital will have a completely negative effect on undergraduate teaching and training. With an annual intake of six students a year teaching students in isolation, away from their medical colleagues, is educationally unsound. The other major drawback is the lack of a holistic approach to dental care that will be given to in-patients at the new hospital, essentially limiting treatment to cover emergencies. The number of medically compromised patients requiring dental treatment in a hospital environment is on the increase; especially as a direct result of the care they receive in the cardio-thoracic and renal unit. This is not to mention the obvious, namely out-patients, referred by general practitioners and the Health Centers and those attending for routine care, who also need a medical intervention or opinion.

On a brighter note we can safely say that the undergraduate course is on a sound footing, following as it does the concept enshrined in "The First Five Years"<sup>1</sup> published by the General Dental Council of the UK. This strives to standardise the undergraduate curriculum on a European and indeed international



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level. The Dental Department at the University of Malta adheres to these concepts as can be evidenced from the reports of successive external examiners, so far always from the UK. That it also produces graduates falling under the definition of a "European Dentist" is the result of constant monitoring, over many years, and of introducing changes in line with the recommendations and in particular the clinical competencies established by the Advisory Committee for the Training of General Dental Practitioner of the EU Commission.<sup>2</sup> The EU Directive on the Training of Dentists is a historic document of little use beyond listing basic requirement.<sup>3</sup> The report submitted by the TAIEX delegation that visited the Department of Dental Surgery in February 2002 is ample proof that we have attained European expectations in our undergraduate course.<sup>4</sup>

## Postgraduate training & CPE

It is the aim of the combined Departments of St. Luke's Hospital and the University to provide structured postgraduate training to satisfy the needs of the Health Department and the community. Within the context of the size of our population, 400,000, it is our firm belief that specialist training should combine both local and foreign training.<sup>5-8</sup> St. Luke's Hospital, as a Dental Teaching Hospital, is recognised for part of the Membership of the Faculty of Dental Surgery (MFDS), a qualifying postgraduate intercollegiate examination, by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. A factor in this recognition is the clinical laboratory support in the wide field

of medicine, available to trainees. Although it is early days, we are more than just satisfied with our MFDS pass rate.

The postgraduate training that we are currently pursuing will need not only further financial support but also an increase in space and staff. Hence our pressing requirement to expand facilities.

The Department of Dental Surgery has put in place a two year rotating appointment for new graduates. This training programme covers all fields of clinical dentistry and is based at the Hospital, the Health Centers, the School Dental Clinic and a term in Public Health Dentistry. It is being suggested that the period of training becomes compulsory before the grant of a warrant to practice dentistry. The practice of graduates obtaining a warrant on qualification is regarded as unsatisfactory and does not reflect current trends. If this is implemented, it would be advantageous to include in the training programme a period in general dental practice under the supervision of a qualified and approved trainer.

The Dental Association of Malta has supported our Continuing Professional Education (CPE) initiative.<sup>9</sup> Attendance is gratifying, far beyond our initial expectations. This programme is run on a voluntary basis but has reached a stage where, with little effort, it can be developed into an obligatory scheme. CPE is obligatory in only one EU member state but a number are in the process of gradual introduction. The time has come for us to do this; given the logistics and the response, as a result of the active participant of the Dental Association of Malta, this should not be either difficult or traumatic to achieve.

## Research

Research output is, no matter what, size-related to some extent. With a ratio of one dentist to every 2500 population, it would be unwise to expand numerically. Dental needs in the community are being met. Social factors are crucial in determining the level of dental disease now largely preventable. It is essential that disease trends and treatment needs continue to be monitored; this is currently the case, in order to evolve appropriate preventive measures. Basic research, which is on the increase, is being carried out jointly with other dental institutions in the UK. Joint research programmes are becoming increasingly attractive even in larger institutions. EU funding encourages cross-border participation and this is something we

are actively pursuing. It is heartening to note that small as we are as a Faculty and Department we have five PhD projects under way and as many dental graduates following specialisation programmes abroad.

## Support Staff

A four year Diploma course in Dental Technology was established at the University in 2001. The practical training, as with other para-medical courses, is centered at St. Luke's Hospital. This will ensure qualified technical staff both for the Hospital and to cover the needs in general dental practice.

A glaring and urgent need is the establishment of a course leading to a Dental Surgery Assistance (DSA) certificate. This, easily achievable at minimal cost, has in principal been agreed to by the Health Authorities for some years. Employing qualified DSAs would have the dual advantage of increasing clinical efficiency and releasing nurses, acting as dental chairside assistants in hospitals and the Health Centres, for duties they are better qualified to perform and where they are needed. The biggest problem with implementing this reform appears to be that everyone agrees with it - we all know how difficult it can be when everybody nods approval.

## References

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