



The Future of Dentistry- Where is Malaysia Heading?

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Perceived and normatic needs for dental treatment is increasing globally, as patients in various parts of the world demonstrate different patterns of oral diseases (1). Some regions showed an increasing demand for aesthetic dentistry (2), while some demonstrated a rise in procedures relating to tooth preservation and functional restoration (3). In spite of the variable market demands, it is evident that utilisation of oral health care services has improved worldwide, regardless of patients' socioeconomic status and other personal or environmental circumstances (1).

An increased dental attendance was also observed in Malaysia, a developing country that is experiencing improved oral health awareness among its citizen across the age spectrum (4). Whilst oral health education and promotion was found to have some impact on public awareness and dental seeking behavior (5), most Malaysians still sought professional dental attention only in the presence of oral and/or dental complaints (4). Diseases-inflicted dental attendance among Malaysians is evident in the recent National Oral Health Survey of Adults 2010, which reported experiencing oral sign and symptom as the most common reason for dental visit (56.6%), while routine checkup is only practiced by a small proportion of the population (15.9%) (4). Perhaps, if routine dental checkup was a common practice, occurrence of oral diseases, such as caries, periodontal disease and oral mucosal lesions among the Malaysian population could be reduced. It was noted that a huge percentage of

Malaysian adults require periodontal therapy (87.2%), caries treatment (54.1%), prostheses (45.9%) and referral for oral lesions (2.7%), which needs are generally higher among the geriatric (65 years and above) population (99.8%) (4). The needs and demands for oral health care are also high among the increasing number of people with special needs in Malaysia, who often present with various oral complications (6-8).

Although the prevalence of oral diseases among Malaysians is high (4), in comparison with developed countries (9, 10), it was encouraging to note that the level of oral health knowledge among Malaysians are improving, as people are more aware of the various treatment options for, and the risk factors of oral/dental issues (4, 11). It has also been found that there is an increased intent for aesthetic treatment, such as tooth whitening and orthodontic treatment among Malaysian adults (12, 13). In addition to local demands, Malaysian dentists are also experiencing an influx of foreign patients who visit the country for the purpose of dental treatment, an activity defined as 'dental tourism' (14). The most common procedures performed by Malaysian dentists on patients who visited the country on the purpose of dental tourism include periodontic therapy, restorative treatment and oral surgery (14).

As the market for dentistry in Malaysia demonstrates a variety of patients' treatment needs and demands, it is reasonable to note that the future of dentistry in Malaysia is wide, with patients requiring numerous types of treatment procedures, under the different areas of practice. Dental education, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, therefore plays a vital role in preparing the next generation of dental professionals with sound knowledge, adequate skills and positive attitudes, to meet the future challenges in dental practice that seek to require a practitioner's versatility in performing various different procedures in a competent manner. It is hoped that the practice of dentistry in Malaysia will continue to thrive at the highest level of professionalism, as the needs and demands for oral health care service evolve throughout time.

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