

Foreword

One of the papers that appears in this edition (Ter-Poghosyan and Nalbandyan (2010)) highlights a growing problem relating to overproduction of new dentists. It explains that in Armenia, a country with a population of just over two million people, there are now five dental schools (one state funded and four private) which in 2008 graduated 500 new dentists. The authors are concerned that as a result there will be increasing numbers of unemployed dentists in Armenia. They are not alone.

Within the European Union (EU) three countries have been overproducing dentists for some years. They are Portugal, Spain and Romania. It can be argued that in all three countries a substantial proportion of the population who need oral healthcare are deterred from seeking it because they perceive that they cannot afford to pay for it. In both Portugal and Spain, the most recent surveys indicate that fewer than 40% of the population visit a dentist each year. The current economic situation with increasing unemployment is unlikely to improve this situation. Indeed, a number of people who have been regular visitors to a dentist may cease to be or may defer expensive items of treatment to a date in the future. It is therefore a particularly bad time to over produce dentists in these countries, or indeed in any country.

It is of course possible for dentists who are EU nationals and who have EU qualifications to work anywhere in the EU. As a result one option for under or unemployed dentists has been to emigrate to another EU member state where there are better opportunities to find work. One such state has been the United Kingdom (UK). The UK strictly controls the number of places at dental schools and for some years appears to have produced insufficient numbers of dentists to meet the needs and demands of the population, approximately 66% of whom visit a dentist at least once per year. As a result over 5000 dentists from other EU member states are currently working in the UK. Not surprisingly, the numbers from Portugal, Romania and Spain rose dramatically between 2007 and 2009. However, the number of students at dental schools was allowed to increase in the mid-2000s and increasing numbers of UK educated dentists are now graduating. This factor, together with the eco-

nomic downturn, is likely to make it increasingly difficult for new UK graduates and those from outside the UK to find work.

It is an extremely difficult task to ensure that there are an appropriate number of suitably trained personnel to meet the oral health needs of the population. The issue is further clouded as for an increasing number of patients, oral health, defined as a pain-free, functional dentition with no active disease, is not enough and an aesthetically pleasing smile is seen as essential. If there is money to pay for such aesthetic treatment, this trend will theoretically lead to more work for dentists. If there are insufficient numbers of dentists and/or financial barriers, a proportion of people who need oral health care cannot access it. If there are too many dentists, then there is under or unemployment.

A large number of factors have to be balanced when planning the oral health care workforce and a number of organisations, often with conflicting objectives, should be involved. These organisations include governments, through their Ministries of Health and Education, the universities and dental associations or chambers. It appears that overproduction of dentists is often a problem in countries where the government is unable or unwilling to take the lead in planning.

One possible solution to the problem would be for the European Commission (EC) to require all member states to plan their health care workforces (including oral healthcare workforce) in collaboration and to limit the total number of training places within the EU. In spite of the fact that the EC regulates the volume of fish that can be legally caught at sea by EU fishermen through quotas to each maritime EU member state, it seems unlikely that it will allocate quotas for numbers of dental students to EU member states. It therefore seems likely that there will be increasing numbers of unemployed young dentists until such time as parents of potential dental students realise that there is a real chance that they will pay several thousand Euros for five years of university education at the end of which there is no work for their child and will refuse to pay.

Prof. Dr. Kenneth A. Eaton
Editor in Chief