An interview with Dr Meng-Wong Taing, University of Queensland.

“There is [...] a need for growing partnerships and collaborations between national professional dental and pharmacy organisations”

Pharmacists have great access to patients within the community, which provides them with an opportunity to promote oral healthcare and offer advice. The average Australian visits his or her community pharmacy approximately 14 times a year, and we also know from various studies that pharmacy staff express a strong interest in promoting better oral healthcare within their communities.

Specifically, pharmacists may be more involved in:

- identifying patients at risk of poor oral health;
- implementing oral health prevention initiatives and providing advice on good oral hygiene and minor oral health problems;
- supplying oral health products and providing evidence-based advice;
- informing patients about medications which may affect oral health, including medicines that increase the risk of dental caries;
- implementing assessment and referral pathways;
- carrying out oral health promotion activities and events; and
- addressing common risk factors in chronic diseases.

What can dental professionals do to make this collaborative approach a reality?

I believe that the principles underpinning good collaborative working relationships are trust, open communication pathways and professionalism. The advice I give to my pharmacist colleagues that can be reciprocated by dentists for promoting good collaborative working relationships includes:

- get to know your local pharmacist if you’re a dentist, and vice versa. Reach out to each other, share ideas and support each other in your clinical practices so that you aren’t isolated and feeling alone.
- make yourselves available for each other whenever there is need. In your busy schedules, please make sure to provide a timely response if a call is missed or a message is left.
- find ways in which you can assist each other. By talking openly about your respective needs, try to identify where you can best support each other’s practices and work hard towards achieving these goals with the aim of improving patient outcomes.

To make this collaborative approach a reality, there is also a need for growing partnerships and collaborations between national professional dental and pharmacy organisations. These partnerships could support the development and implementation of mutually appropriate pharmacy practice guidelines, decision support pathways and interprofessional education resources.

Is your model specific to Australia and its approach to oral health? Is it influenced, for example, by the fact that only 53% of Australians possess dental coverage?

Currently, there are no established oral healthcare models within Australian community pharmacies.

What is needed is the development and evaluation of innovative and collaborative pharmacy-based models to address poor oral health in rural and metropolitan regions. We need to show evidence that implementation of any proposed model is feasible, effective and mutually acceptable by both professions. I am working with Australian dentists, university dental schools and government health departments in order to obtain funding for the development and testing of collaborative oral healthcare models.