COVID-19 and the potential for dental reform

An interview with Professor Richards Watt, University College London.

By Brendan Day, Dental Tribune International

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted some of the underlying problems that dentistry is facing globally. As many of us are aware, dentistry is recovering slowly, and in different countries, various issues have cropped up, but there are some common agendas that we really need to begin to tackle. One of these issues is the lack of an emphasis on prevention in dentistry, either delivered within clinical settings or across community and public health areas. This was one of the main points I was trying to get across in my letter.

What kinds of steps can, or should, be taken to implement these reforms?

I think the first thing to stress when dealing with such issues is that it’s not just simple reform; it’s not a straightforward issue. For many, many years, the dental profession has recognised that prevention is important, and changes have been made in some countries to address this. However, even in countries that have had the most effect on those populations that are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. The pandemic has [...] had the most effect on those populations that are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

To be fair, these are big issues that don’t have any quick, easy answers. But I think it’s important that, as a profession, we debate and discuss these bigger issues because, at a time of crisis, there is an opportunity for us to really think through what the future holds.

Do you think that the fact that SARS-CoV-2 has affected everyone’s lives, not just those who suffer from oral health inequalities, will have an impact on the potential for reform in an area like dentistry?

In broader discussions taking place in the media, in academia, and so on, almost all sectors are taking stock of where they are and what this pandemic has meant to them. And overall, there seems to be a shared view that we don’t necessarily want to go back to how things were pre-COVID-19, not least of all because certain things are unlikely to ever be re-established.

In a lot of countries—certainly across Europe—the pandemic has disrupted daily life for many, but it has, however, had the most effect on those populations that are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This was already a problem in dentistry, since it often hasn’t managed to provide care for disadvantaged groups to the same extent as it has for other groups. So providing access to dental care for those groups who suffer from inequalities remains a challenge that we need to address.

Do you think that a measure such as teledentistry, which has been increasingly implemented during the pandemic, can work to help reduce inequalities in dental access in the long term?

Yes, I think that is the case. In parts of the world such as Australia, you have rural communities that are very isolated geographically, and so, rather than expecting them to travel to a city for treatment, a notion like teledentistry should be explored for its potential to improve access for them.

During this pandemic, are there any countries that you think have provided examples for how reform can be introduced into dentistry at a systemic level?

It’s a bit too soon to say for sure, since we’re still very much in the middle of the pandemic. However, if we consider the UK as an example, we can see how the role of many dental professionals has changed during this time owing to their redeployment. When dental services were shut down in the UK—as they were in many countries—their workforce was redeployed to other areas of the healthcare system, either to support efforts to combat the pandemic or to provide other forms of healthcare beyond dentistry.

And it is clear that the pandemic has had the most effect on those populations that are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This was one of the main points I was trying to get across in my letter.

What is the potential for dental reform to improve access for disadvantaged groups?

Many major dental companies have experienced massive losses throughout this pandemic. Do you think this could have an impact on the provision of dental services and will this potential impact be positive or negative?

I think this could have an impact on the provision of dental services. However, I think it’s too early to tell whether the impact will be positive or negative.

To many, the pandemic has [...] had the most effect on those populations that are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.