Matthias Kaiser was an English and French language teacher before becoming CEO of Kaiser Dental Laboratory in Germany. Today, he leads a team of four dental technicians in Singapore that produces and delivers dental prostheses for dentists in Asia and Europe. Dental Tribune Group Editor Daniel Zimmermann spoke with him about the working conditions in Singapore and his opinion of the dental laboratory market in Asia.

Daniel Zimmermann: Mr. Kaiser, where did the idea of establishing a dental laboratory in Singapore originate?

Matthias Kaiser: The idea came from my brother Christoph, who was hired by a French dental laboratory in the mid-1980s but was dissatisfied with quality standards. With his wife Farida, he founded the Kaiser Dental Laboratory in Singapore in 1987. We later followed with proDentum in Berlin for sales in Germany.

Quality standards in technology and service were more important to us than being the cheapest supplier in the market. Throughout the years, this concept has brought us a very stable business. We have seen many competitors copying our concept and constantly looking for favourable locations throughout the region; however, they still buy work that is more sophisticated from us.

Since the 1990s, a number of Asian countries, such as Singapore, have experienced considerable economic growth rates. What impact have these developments had on the dental market?

Dentistry is and will remain primarily a handicraft. Large entities like in other manufacturing areas, such as the textile industry, are not imitable. Even if there are quite a number of large laboratories in China, individual training and technical routines remain a problem. In the last couple of years, all other international laboratories have left Singapore and are now producing in China or Vietnam. However, conditions and quality standards in these countries vary to a high degree.

In a recent interview with DT Asia Pacific, the president of STD Lab Management in Beijing estimated that there are 5,000 dental laboratories in China. What is your opinion of this potential?

It is a question of quality and demand. In China, everything is mass-produced, but everyone who purchases dental prostheses in that country will soon realize the importance of quality and how difficult it is to maintain quality in mass production. I think that Chinese laboratories will be producing for the expanding middle class in the country itself.

Have you thought of entering the Chinese market?

Of course. When you receive an offer to buy an all-ceramic restoration for only $8, you start thinking about this option. However, when you see the product itself, you know that the purchasing of dentures cannot be approached in the same manner as the purchasing of fabrics.

We are patiently waiting for costs to explode in China. Then, we would be on the same technological level again but more advanced in terms of organization and marketing. The current trend shows that our view on this is on the right track.

How do the working conditions in Singapore compare to those in Germany or Europe?

A well-trained dental technician in Singapore can earn as much as a technician in Berlin or any other part of Europe. Although we have experienced an increased cost of living in recent years, efficient labor organisation, the optimal utilisation of resources, and very low ancillary labor costs make production here still attractive, so patients in Germany and other countries can save a lot. As our laboratory in Singapore is certified by the German Technical Supervisory Association (TÜV), the basic conditions for production are more or less the same as those in Germany.

Which markets do you primarily serve?

Approximately 70 per cent of our prosthetic work goes to Germany and Austria, and 10 per cent to Norway and the Netherlands. The 20 per cent remainder goes to the fastest growing markets of Singapore and its neighbouring countries, where high-quality dental laboratory work is in demand.

Do you offer your services via established distribution structures or via the Internet?

We usually take the established routes because our efforts to install an IT-based processing system have failed in the past owing to the lack of a standard interface to the dentist.

At the International Dental Show in Cologne it was evident than automated production of dental prostheses is in the future. What do you think of this development and will Asia soon follow the trend?

In Asia, where people customarily love new technology, these trends are likely to be followed much more quickly than in Europe. However, it seems that there is a long way ahead before all these technologies are able to replace the entire production process. If some day the price for a CAD/CAM-produced all-ceramic restoration is the same as that for a crown produced by hand by a dental technician in China or Singapore, things will probably change. Then we would no longer need to import laboratory work from abroad. I do not see this happening for a long time.

You recently opened a dental clinic. What services do you offer there?

At the clinic, we are working with patients from Singapore who are in particular need of high-quality implantology. There are many expatriates from Germany here and so we would like to hire German dentists. Unfortunately, the Singapore Dental Association is refusing to give us permission to hire them, even though we have already received applications from highly-qualified applicants. But we will continue to work on this matter.

Singapore has recently become a strong player in the medical and dental tourism market. Do you intend to participate in this market as well?

We believe that this could be a good investment, although only a few people would be willing to travel from Europe to Singapore. What we cannot predict at the moment is whether patients from more developed countries in the region will come to Singapore to seek dental treatment. The number of enquiries from Indonesia or Malaysia is noticeably growing. Meanwhile, we are looking for investors who would like to participate in the clinic’s expansion and support our marketing campaigns. And we are looking for Singaporean dentists who speak German well!

Are you planning any special activities for the FDI Congress?

Instead of distributing pictures and brochures, we invite all dentists to see our laboratory facilities ‘in action’ and to speak with our dental technicians and management about possible collaboration. Whoever is interested can just contact us, we’ll pick her or him up at the hotel and bring her or him back to the hotel again. Our staff speak Mandarin, Malay, English and German.

Thank you very much for the interview.