“Seaweed can be found in many fluoridated toothpastes”

An interview with dentist and toothpaste collector Dr Val Kolpakov

Dentist Dr Val Kolpakov has an unusual hobby: he collects toothpastes. His collection is currently recognised as the largest in the world by the Guinness World Record. Kolpakov was born in Russia, Dr Kolpakov moved to the US in 1983 to work as a researcher at the University of Michigan. For the past nine years he has been in practice at his own dental offices in Saginaw (Michigan) and Alpharetta (Georgia). Dr Kolpakov spoke to Yvonne Bachmann, DTF, about his collecting passion, radioactively collectibles and seaweed in our toothpaste.

Yvonne Bachmann: When did you get the idea to start collecting toothpaste?
Dr Val Kolpakov: It was 2002 and I was browsing the Internet. This was when I found some information on Carsten Gutzeit, a man from Germany who collected toothpaste. His collection stood at roughly 500 tubes. This was when I realised what a wonderful hobby collecting toothpaste would be for a dental professional. Imagine the opportunities it offers to learn about other variations of your profession. With this in mind, I decided to start my own collection of toothpaste.

“I estimate that I have 2,000 samples.”

How did you get your collection?
I have friends living all over the world, so I asked them to mail me some of the toothpaste sold in their countries. In addition, I bought old toothpaste on eBay while acquiring contemporary ones in stores. After putting up the Toothpaste World website, people began finding me on the Internet. There were several people who donated their small collections to me. Companies also donated their old and recent products.

Do you usually buy two samples—one to try and one to keep?
No, I normally just get one sample. I already spend a lot of money on my toothpaste collection and doubling the amount would be too much. Often, it is not even possible in the case of old tubes—which are rare finds to begin with. If I am tempted to try a toothpaste that I have in my collection, I just open the only sample I have. All my old toothpastes are so dried up, that I don’t think anybody would even be tempted to try them in their mouth.

How many items do you have in your collection?
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Do you know any other people who collect toothpaste or dental equipment?
I keep in touch with Carsten Gutzeit from Germany, whose collection inspired me. We have exchanged some toothpaste tubes. Since I started my collection, I have been contacted by several people who have small collections of toothpaste. Some of them have donated their entire collections to me. There is also a good collection of toothpowder tins at my alma mater, the University of Michigan dental school. They also have a very good collection of various vintage dental items.

Which are the most interesting items in your collection?
I would consider one item to be the oldest, most rare, and most expensive: a silver English Georgian toothpowder box from 1801. This was a time when toothpaste had not yet been invented and toothpowders were used instead. I paid over US$1,500 for it. The oldest toothpaste I have is dated 1908 and made by Colgate.

My favourite kinds of toothpaste are alcohol flavoured. These range from whisky, like scotch, rye, bourbon, to red wine, amaretto, champagne and many more. Another passion of mine is chocolate-flavoured toothpaste. I have a set of pure chocolate cream packaged in a toothpaste tube with a toothbrush for chocolate lovers. This is more of a gag gift, considering that it is not intended for brushing teeth regularly. However, there are several real tubes of toothpaste with chocolate flavouring as well. Speaking of unusual flavours, the Breath Palette Company tops them all. They came up with 51 flavours, including some of the oldest kinds such as Green Tea, Pumpkin Pudding, and Indian Curry.

What do you estimate the value of your collection to be?
I have spent close to US$20,000 on all my samples. Considering all the work and time I have spent on my collection over the last nine years, I would estimate it at US$50,000. But at this time, I have no intention of selling it. It is my hobby, my passion, the way for me to attract people’s attention to my dental practice and spread information about this wonderful topic.

Are toothpastes generally the same? Is toothpaste bought in Japan any different from toothpaste bought in Italy?
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The main ingredients of all toothpastes are basically the same. However, there are local differences in flavour and some ingredients. Oriental toothpastes often contain ingredients like bamboo salt or ginseng. Japan is well-known for its “high-tech” toothpastes that rebuild enamel, re-mineralise teeth and halt the development of caries.

Is there something people may not know about toothpaste?
You may not recognise the scientific names listed on toothpaste packaging, and thus may be surprised to know that ingredients such as seaweed can be found in many fluoridated toothpastes. According to the American Dental Association, thickening materials include seaweed colloids, mineral colloids, and natural gums.

Do you collect any other unusual items?
I have a small collection of denture containers—holders of different shapes in which edentulous people place their dentures for the night. I also have a collection of dental movie props, including some fake teeth that actors put over their own teeth to look like vampires, or homeless people with rotten teeth.

Do you hold a Guinness World Record?
I’ve considered applying to the Guinness World Records for a long time, but just can’t seem to find the time. Recently, I was contacted by an English journalist who interviewed me and wrote a story about my collection for an English newspaper. Someone at the Guinness World Records Committee came across the article and e-mailed me suggesting I apply for a record. I submitted my application, but as there was no current record involving toothpaste tubes, they had to review whether they could open a new category. Finally, it was approved.

Now I have to submit evidence that I possess all this toothpaste. The evidence must include pictures, a detailed list of all my toothpastes, publications, and statements from witnesses, I do not actually hold this record yet, as was mistakenly reported in the media, but I hope to in the near future.

Thank you very much for this interview.