"Priorities regarding dental care have changed"

An interview with Donna Batchelor, President of the Canterbury Branch of the New Zealand Dental Association

In the second-largest earthquake New Zealand has ever seen, the Canterbury region and its capital Christchurch suffered widespread devastation in early 2011. Two years later, dentists in the region are reporting an increase in stress-related symptoms like bruxism among dental patients. DT Asia Pacific spoke with Donna Batchelor, President of the Canterbury Branch of the New Zealand Dental Association, about the phenomenon, as well as the impact of the disaster on the region’s dental health care infrastructure.

DT Asia Pacific: In a recent interview, you said that some of your members in the region are reporting stress-related symptoms like teeth grinding that could be a result of the February 2011 earthquake. What is the extent of the problem, and how have your members reacted to the situation?

Donna Batchelor: Although there have been no studies to monitor stress-related symptoms like bruxism, among patients, inter-collegial discussions among members of the profession indicate that dentists are seeing more patients with problems of this nature and dealing with them according to their usual practice protocols.

Some have also reported consulting with medical practitioners more than usual concerning patients with stress-related issues.

The Christchurch earthquake of 2011 was the second worst in your country’s history. What is the situation in the region currently?

Since the earthquake, we have had over 11,000 aftershocks. Unfortunately, there is slow progress with rebuilding and fixing damaged roads and sewers, as well as replacing lost facilities and public amenities. Dealing with insurance companies has also proven difficult for many families and businesses.

However, New Zealanders have a get-on-with-it attitude to life and tend to put up with the situation rather than complaining. Many people are finding the long process difficult and stressful though.

How were your members affected by the disaster?

There were no direct casualties among our dental community. Dentists have joined other practitioners or have had to purchase new high tech products in different areas in or outside the city. A very small number have downsized their practices while dealing with home damages or ceased practicing altogether.

Was there any support from the government?

Initial support provided by the government assisted in paying the wages of staff during the first six weeks after the February 22 quake.

"...a significant proportion lost either family homes or business premises."

Computers aren’t just for numbers any more. Some of the most exciting and incredible developments in technology are in the area of advanced diagnostics and treatment. Everyday dentists are faced with remarkable new high tech products both in the office and in the cloud that do everything from finding caries to making a crown. And this is just the beginning – the future is coming and it will be amazing.

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Dentists are Singapore’s most sought-after medical specialists

Almost 50 per cent of users on the site scheduled appointments with dentists, while only 18 per cent booked appointments with obstetricians and gynaecologists, who were the second-most requested type of medical specialist. About 6.5 per cent of users requested appointments with general practitioners and 1.3 per cent with ear, nose and throat specialists.

The data was collected via bookings on www.docdoc.com, a health-care platform for finding doctors and booking appointments online in Singapore and South Korea. The website lists about 29,000 profiles of medical professionals in the Asia Pacific region. "This data highlights the huge demand for dental specialist care in Singapore," said John Sharp, DocDoc’s president and CEO.

"The findings indicate either an undersupply of dentists or an uptick in the demand for cosmetic dentistry, or a combination of both," he suggested.

Currently, Singapore has a dental workforce of slightly over 1,500 dentists, of which two-thirds are employed in the public sector. The dentist-to-patient ratio in the country is about 1 in 3,400.

What has the impact of the quake been on oral health care infrastructure and oral health behaviour?

The Christchurch Hospital Dental Service's pre-quake facility was damaged, and they have had to move into a smaller facility for the next five years. Priorities regarding dental care have changed, as families are seeking less treatment as a result of dealing with the loss of their homes, schools, jobs and security.

Canterbury is a predominantly rural region. How did the oral health of people in the area compare with the New Zealand standard before the disaster?

I have to admit that we do not know. Although the dental status in rural and urban areas was examined in the 2009 New Zealand Oral Health Survey, findings from that region were not reported.

Do you have any recommendations for other dentists or dental organisations living in high-risk areas regarding how to prepare for a disaster like this?

All records should be backed up off-site, preferably in another city, as obtaining records for disaster victim identification was very important in the aftermath of the quake. Fresh water supplies, hand sanitisers and emergency kits for various specialties, such as orthodontics, endodontics and maxillofacial surgery, should be stored in significant numbers. The New Zealand Association of Orthodontists, for example, has created a travel kit containing pliers and other equipment.

Replacing equipment and materials was also difficult and protracted after the quake, despite the very best efforts of the suppliers. Therefore, having the tools, materials and equipment to provide basic urgent treatment is important.

Dentists living in high-risk areas should also check the wording of their insurance policies.

Thank you very much for this interview.

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SINGAPORE: According to the latest figures published by a Singaporean health-care specialist portal, dentists are at the top of the list of the ten most requested categories of medical professionals on the website. The profession beat gynaecologists and general practitioners by far.