College of Dentistry - Sharjah University welcomes new dean

By Dental Tribune Middle East

Sharjah, UAE: Professor Richard J. Simonsen, DDS, MS, on behalf of Dental Tribune Middle East would like to congratulate you with your new role as the Dean of the College of Dentistry and Executive Director of the Dental Hospital at Sharjah University in UAE.

DTME: How did you find your way to the Middle East, through Kuwait, to Sharjah, UAE?

Professor Simonsen: Thank you very much for this opportunity. I have always had an adventurous streak in me, and circumstances, like the end of World War II when I was born, meant that as a small boy I lived in two countries; England where I was born; and Norway where my father was a teenager. I decided that I wanted to study dentistry, and I wanted to do so in the United States. I was very fortunate to get that opportunity through a series of serendipitous events. So having lived and worked in several countries, and having lectured now in about 35 countries, when the opportunity arose to spend the tail-end of my Academic career in the Middle East, where I had never been, I jumped at it. I believe one should always take that opportunity to grow, and learn. I wanted to see for myself, rather than rely on the news reports, just what the people of the Middle East are really like. Already I know that this was a very wise decision because I have learned so much about the wonderful people, the places, and the politics of the region. Being in Sharjah at this moment in time, at this moment in my life, surrounded by the bright young minds of our students, is a very special experience for me. I feel so very lucky to be here.

How do you experience the Dental College at Sharjah University at the moment?

I see a young University with inspired leadership, a hard-working and dedicated faculty and staff, and an incredible group of students—you put that all together and it feels like I am sitting on a rocket on the launch pad! Professor Rani Samsudin, who led this College for 15 years, started up years, deserves credit for building what we have here today. At the same time, this is not only as good as the people in it, and around it, I have to note that I am pleasantly surprised in my decision to accept this position was people-based. I cannot explain how exciting it is for me to have the opportunity to be at a University where the Sultan Al Qasimi, being such a well-educated man himself with two earned PhD degrees, has education as one of the pillars of his vision for his Emirate. Already the resources put into building University City, make this University one of the most impressive in the world. I certainly have never seen such an impressive infrastructure in my life. Now those of us entrusted with guiding the College and the University in the coming years must seize on this opportunity to make the program as good as the beautiful Islamic architecture on display on our campus.

What are your plans for the coming year as Dean of the Dental College?

I think the College of Dentistry is on the verge of a big leap forward into the next stage of its development, which has to include the introduction of graduate programs into the curriculum and the development of Continuing Education programs run by the University. Bringing graduate students into the College, elevates the level of educational stimulation for us all. With the introduction of Master’s and eventually PhD degree programs, the College would take a step forward, and the ability of the College to create new knowledge through research would begin. I also believe that the College should be a vital resource for the practice of dentistry, after all, is a health profession where the end result is relief from pain...and patient care, rather than being split into rival departments with patient care and for the student. The students at MU learned that we treat our patients holistically recognizing that we are not just ‘fixing a tooth’ but delivering a service that affects a human being’s overall general health. Oral health is an important part of total systemic health. Also, I put a focus on ethics as a foundational subject for all dental students, and I would like to motivate our students to continue doing the right thing.

What can you say about the Dental Education in the region?

From what I have seen, dental education in the Middle East is on a par with anywhere in the world, it just lacks depth in terms of the numbers of well-trained specialists who can assume top level Professorial roles—but they are just around the corner.

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What advice can you provide our students on bridging the gap between post-graduation and working as a full-time dentist?

Well, our students here are faced with a unique situation prior to getting licensed here. It’s very true that a four- or five-year dental education can only do so much, and every graduated student will learn a great deal from additional experience after graduation from dental school, particularly from being around additional experienced mentors. So I would advise them to recognize that once a dental student, always a student of dentistry. We are in a profession where we continue learning for a lifetime, and that makes it very exciting indeed!

Based on your own experience how did you proceed after graduating?

I found a niche for myself. Recognizing that it is hard to be an expert in every area of general dentistry, I focused on the acid-etch technique, which was a relatively new concept when I graduated from dental school. I looked for ways to minimize the loss of tooth structure in preventive and restorative dentistry. That’s my passion—conservation of tooth structure, and I would encourage any graduate to find their niche in dentistry, and become as good as you possibly can be in that area, which, as it was in my case, may require additional education in a graduate program.

Do you have anything else you would like to share with the readers?

I believe that any school lives for its students. If you want to put it in lay terms; the students are the customers of the University. We exist for them and we should not go back to the old days when students were regarded as a lower form of life until one day they graduated and became instant colleagues! Of course young people need guidance, advice and mentoring, but they also need our respect, empathy and just plain kindness at times. I have been amazed at what a remarkable organization of students we have here in the University of Sharjah Dental Students Association!

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