‘A profession, not a job’

Dental Tribune Speaks to Chief Dental Officer for Wales, Dr Paul Langmaid

At the recent launch of Smile-on’s new office in Cardiff, Wales, I took the opportunity to speak with Dr Paul Langmaid (photographed), Chief Dental Officer for Wales. Dr Langmaid was appointed CDO for Wales in November 1997. He graduated from Cardiff Dental School in 1975 and undertook house officer posts in oral and maxillofacial surgery at Cardiff Royal Infirmary and University of Wales Hospitals, and in paediatric dentistry at Cardiff Dental Hospital, before going into general practice in Cornwall in 1976.

He has worked in the three main components of NHS dentistry (general dental services, community dental services and hospital dental services) and also in Israel and Romania. From 1986 to 1992 Dr Langmaid worked for the Overseas Development Administration as a Technical Co-operation Officer in the British West Indies. In July 2010 Dr Langmaid was awarded a CBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honour List for services to dentistry.

I asked Dr Langmaid about the latest dental health initiatives which have been seeing success and how dentistry has been progressing through the political agenda in Wales. He replied: “Dentistry in Wales is still regulated by legislation for England and Wales unlike Scotland and Northern Ireland, so we are closer to developments which are going on in England. Of course they are accelerating at the moment with all sorts of workstreams in the Department of Health, guided by Dr Barry Cockcroft (CDO England).” Other members of my team have been closer to the details of the development there and we've also got a political difference now between the government in Wales and the government in England and that's hard to predict how that will affect what we do.

In fact it's almost impossible to predict because it will be down to Ministers to decide on what they wish to follow from what has been beeing developed in England.

Exciting

“So for me the most exciting work we've done over the last few years in Wales is a programme for teaching children both in nurseries and schools and general practice, up to the age of seven or eight, on how to brush their teeth, using toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste. Wales is unlikely to have water fluoridation any day soon because it doesn't have the regulations that England passed in order to permit a public consultation, but our Minister is very supportive of helping children in school settings to look after their teeth and value them. After a trial of ‘Design to Smile’ in Wales (cf ‘Brushing for Life’ in England, Scotland Smiles in Scotland), in some of the worst areas of tooth decay in Wales or in places where children don't have access to a toothbrush or share one. As a result of these trials, which were evaluated by the Department of Dental Public Health, Cardiff University Dental School, we secured more than £5.5m to use across Wales in 2009/10 and that's going to be £3.4m in 2011/12 so everybody will have the opportunity to use fluoride toothpaste and toothbrushes - in junior schools there will be brushing busses there for children to keep their toothbrushes in school and they will get a toothbrush to take home. I went to the launch in Gwent (Newport) on an estate and I had to give a talk to about 100 children between the ages five and eight.

“It was a fantastic experience. It was very impressive and the Community Dental Service (CDS) that delivers this on the ground, right across Wales are our partners, our agents and our friends - we still have a Community Dental Service in Wales and it's still called that. I think that the CDS is a most important thing and in my view the best thing for dentistry our Minister [Edwina Hart], has supported in the last couple of years.”

Access

Dr Langmaid added: “In terms of access, dentistry in Wales is nothing like the problem that it was in England – it never was that bad. When John Redwood was our secretary of state in 1997, he invested £3.5m in dentistry which has been followed by the schemes we put up were the precursor of the PDS Schemes in England - that was a success story for Wales. I was the Deputy Chief Dental Officer then and it was the Chief Dental Officer David Heap... who was the father, mother and midwife of it all.”

“I’ve been fortunate because I’ve been able to see it grow; see the benefit was that we could use the funds that could be transferred by new arrangements into the CDS so they could employ people to do general dentistry. That still runs but it’s now what you would call a PDS because that’s basically what it is.”

Putting patients first

Looking to the future, Dr Langmaid discussed what he would like to see in dentistry in Wales:

“What I champion and what I want to see is that dentists put patients first, that they utilise the funding that is made available for CPD, post graduate courses that meet GDC requirements; that we continue to make these available for all members of the dental team, and that as professionals they see it is important to continually improve your knowledge through attendance at courses, through utilising opportunities with providers of healthcare education - mean that’s a no brainer - and other verifiable and non-verifiable post graduate information. Younger dentists have grown up with access to the internet, online resources and the Minister is still happy to fund post-graduate education which is done in groups - not as a loner – because I think the ability to chat to your colleagues in a safe environment and learn from their mistakes is valuable.

“I still champion a profession that I was very pleased to join in 1975 and I am a strong believer that it is a profession and not a job and the standards that have allowed the public to trust you have to be maintained at all costs; education is a part of that recognition and you have to do the right things - even if nobody is looking. You should be self-starting and undertake self-examination, the more modern terms is re-reflection and you should be ‘doing that’.”

“['What I champion and what I want to see is that dentists put patients first’]