Humbled to meet you ...

Professor and dean of Kent, Surrey and Sussex (KSS) Deanery, Professor Stephen Lambert-Humble has dedicated his life to dentistry, forged firstly through his training and then working in the field with the Royal Navy all over the globe. Now, Prof Lambert-Humble is busier than ever spearheading new dental courses and initiatives, supervising the training of our future dentists, and advising on many dental committees and boards. Yvonne Gordon reports.

Prof Stephen Lambert-Humble, 61, was the first dental dean for the UK armed forces. Originally studying at the Royal London Hospital, he then spent more than 50 years in the Royal Navy, working his way up to Surgeon Captain in the Royal Naval Dental Service where he was a general dental practitioner, but also training dental nurses and hygienists, moving on to become Dental Practice Adviser.

In this capacity, he trained Royal Navy’s Vocational Dental Practitioners and eventually became dental dean for all the armed forces.

He explains: ‘Working in dentistry in the Navy was an exciting way of practising the profession. The best years I had were in Hong Kong where I treated UK servicemen and their families, and Hong Kong and Gurkha servicemen, as well as looking after the British Embassy staff in Beijing. It was both an insight into Chinese culture and the differing mouths in different cultures, which are influenced by diet and ethnography. The Chinese eat far less refined sugar and carbohydrates. I was proud to become the first UK dental dean for the armed forces.’

Prof Lambert-Humble retired from the Navy early in 2005, because he wanted to continue his work in the field of training. He says: ‘One has to retire any way at around 55 in the service, so I began to look for a post elsewhere.’

If the politics were right, the country he would have most liked to live in would have been South Africa, which he visited while serving at sea where he looked after sailors’ teeth on several ships in the 1970s.

He says: ‘All the people, black and white, whom I met, were fascinating and the countryside fabulous.’

One of the few countries he has not visited is South America, but he did organise the dental part of an expedition and publish a report on the work of a group of servicemen who visited the upper reaches of the Amazon, taking dentistry to isolated villages.

Work portfolio

In his deanery post, Prof Lambert-Humble is funded by the NHS to provide vocational dental training, look after senior house-officers’ training, amongst other things, and to provide Continuing Professional Development for dentists across the South East coastal area. He has extended his work to cater for the whole dental team and is the lead dean nationally for dental care professionals. His working day varies considerably.

He says: ‘In my job there is no such thing as a typical working day. For two days a week I am out of the office. For example, I was recently in Brighton for the National Dental Tutor’s Conference, which I organised, and then in Manchester at the National Examination Board for Dental Nurses, where I am a director, and past chairman. I have several national and local roles which take me out and about to many meetings.

In the office I deal with many issues by email, phone and letter, have regular team meetings, plus business manager meetings and one-to-ones. I interview Fitness to Practice and overseas dentists and also organise many educational programmes.’

Prof Lambert-Humble’s role is predominantly one of leadership, organisation and management for four days a week, but on the fifth day, he is director of the Division of Dentistry at the University of Kent. He is also a Consultant in Dental Public Health (DPH) for which he is also Lead Dean, gaining an Msc in DPH with honours, in 1981.

He says: ‘In my role as Lead Dean for DPH I meet with consultants and am part of the Specialist Advisory Committee which manages the discipline meeting twice a year and regularly by e-mail. He is also closely associated with the Faculty of General Dental Practice (UK) where he represents COPDEN (The Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors), and has been a Board member and twice Vice-Dean. He loves engaging with staff and students at KSS Deanery.

He comments: ‘I have lots of contact with dental trainees and tutors which I really enjoy. At the start I thought I would miss clinical dentistry, but it is very rewarding to watch students as they progress through their courses, and develop into competent professionals. It gives me a great buzz and is what motivates and drives me. Although my job is to commission, perform-manage and quality assure, I make sure I have my feet on the ground with the trainees.’

Meanwhile, Prof Lambert-Humble was also responsible for setting up an innovative accredited training programme for dental nurses - DN START, and its predecessor DNART. He says: ‘When regulation of dental nurses was being talked about in 1998-2000, I was chair-man of the National Examining Board for Dental Nurses and we were very concerned that there would be registration, without many nurses having access to training. So I came up with the idea for the Dental Nurse Access to Registration Training course, which was then funded by the Department of Health and the British Dental Association.’

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He says: ‘Clinical Dental Technicians have only just been brought into the fold by the GDC. A group was training in Canada and the GDC looked at the gap between that course and what was needed in the UK.’

He wrote and delivered the course, as a result of which 120 trainees are now able to register in the UK. He is now producing a new course which will bring upwards of 2,500 more experienced clinical dental technicians to registration ‘All of them can now become a proper part of a dental team.’

Never one to stand still, Prof Lambert-Humble has also set up a Masters degree in Primary Dental Care at the University of Kent, as well as a BSc in Primary Dental Care for Dental Care Professionals at the same university. In addition, he is in the process of writing a BSc in Dental Practice Management.

He says: ‘My aim is to professionalise everyone and set wide and clear career pathways for everyone.’

He thinks some dental schools can be a bit inward-looking and are often not involved enough in the community and the real world of general dental practice.

He comments: ‘Although students come out well-qualified, they still need considerable induction training into the real world of practising dentistry, which Vocational Training provides.’

He thinks that maybe dental training should mirror medical training, which also has a five-year course and then gives two degrees, a Bachelor of Medicine, and a Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS). In Dentistry, he feels dental undergraduates should get a dental therapist qualification after three years (a BSc in Dental Practice) and then after a further two years training, a BSc in Dental Surgery.

On this, he says: ‘This would also enable them to easily get their outreach experience in the workplace (General Dental Practice) as a dental therapist, and would also allow dental therapists to do a top-up degree in Dental Surgery to become a dentist, whereas now the therapist has to go back to university for five years.’

Nevertheless, he thinks patients’ needs are quite different nowadays and training has changed accordingly.

Skewed focus

‘Training has changed hugely in some areas through the years. We no longer have as many patients without teeth. Mouths are much healthier, but we still tend to concentrate on dealing with disease, whereas we ought to concentrate more on prevention.

We also have much more educated patients partly as a result of the Internet, who ask about the alternatives and want much more direct involvement in their treatment.

The shape of the dental profession is also very different. When I trained in the East End in the late 1960s/early 70s, there were 10 female students out of a course of 50. Most of the students were white males. Immigration from various parts of the world changed the ethnic mix, and now over 50 per cent of dental undergraduates are female.

That means the shape of the profession is changing as a greater percentage of women work part-time.

‘Also, team delivery nowadays is very different. When I qualified, many dentists didn’t even have dental nurses. Now the dental team includes dental nurses, hygienists, dental therapists, dental technicians and clinical dental technicians, all of whom are specialists in their own way.’

On the future of dentistry, he believes it is vital to look ahead. He explains: ‘In the future we will see fewer dentists, but leading a larger team of dental professionals. This will mirror the nurse-practitioners who complement GPs in today’s doctors’ surgeries.

‘In dentistry there is a tendency just to plan for the problems of today. But if we look into a crystal ball regarding future treatment, we will need the right manpower for that. Many dentists now do implants and cosmetic work.

Bio-technology is moving the profession rapidly forward however, and a kings College professor recently told me that we now have the technology to grow new teeth, but not quite yet in a natural tooth-shape, which will take about ten years. So within 20 years there will be new skills needed. We need to plan for them.

‘Technology means we could be painting out tooth decay in the future, not drilling, so less skill would be needed for that.

‘There are huge changes afoot in bio-technology, in demands from patients and in team-work.’

Prof Lambert-Humble stresses that basic human qualities are essential to be a good dentist. He says: ‘The most important qualities in a trainee dentist, apart from the technical know-how, are a gentle, caring and compassionate manner. Trainee dentists need to learn to be professional in attitude and appearance and consider everyone with whom they are working. It is vital that they become team players with a ‘we’ not a ‘me’ attitude.

‘If someone has those skills then the practical skills can be easily learned. It is rare for dentists to have poor technical skills. When undergoing treatment, patients are in a very vulnerable position and dentists need to be aware of this and communicate accordingly.

The GDC is currently considering re-validating dentists and subsequently all members of the dental team every few years, examining their development and competence in four domains - clinical, professional, communication and management & leadership skills.

With Prof Lambert-Humble at the helm of KSS Deaneys, patients can rest assured that their teeth are in the safe hands of the dentists of the future.}