To discuss about the future in holistic healthcare education, prevention met up with Dr Marzia Massignani, Global Scientific Affairs Manager for Sunstar, at the company’s new Étoy headquarters in Switzerland—just a stone’s throw from the beautiful Lake Geneva.

“The holistic connection between oral and general health really is our main focus,” she explained. “By taking care of your oral health, you are taking care of your general health. Interestingly, there is still so much that can and needs to be studied in this field. The biggest challenge, however, is gaining people’s attention. People are being bombarded with information in the form of blogs, journals, social media, and so on. Obviously, oral and general health information easily get lost along the way.”

Where did Sunstar’s holistic approach to well-being originate?

Dr Marzia Massignani: Prior to his death of complications from diabetes, Kunio Kaneda, Sunstar founder, made it very clear in his last few hours of conversations with his son, Hiroo, that he wanted him to search for the best professionals working around diabetes. As a representative of Sunstar at the Sunstar Portside Symposium in Kobe in Japan in 1987, Hiroo addressed the link between diabetes and oral health. There had been a number of studies done before, but by bringing this link to the attention of the scientific community and promoting research on the subject, he really opened up the way for a new field of study that is now widely accepted and researched. Of course, this vision has now been taken up and driven by the third generation, led by CEO Yoshihiro Kaneda.

Is there a difference in how oral health and other medical specialists regard this interconnection?

We have been doing research on how diabetes associations communicate with patients and found that this link sometimes is not stressed enough. We gained the impression that this idea is still not widely accepted in the medical community and that there is more input provided by periodontists than diabetes researchers at present. However, in World Health Organization reports and the International Diabetes Federation guidelines, diabetes is already described as being linked to periodontal disease and vice versa. Moreover, as part of a project Sunstar funded, the European Federation of Periodontology and the International Diabetes Federation released a number of new guidelines for dental professionals, medical professionals and patients. So, although more organisations are starting to address this link, Sunstar still has an important role in educating the wider public and supporting health professionals.

In the process, we have developed a virtual reality tool showcasing the connection between oral and general health. It is a purely scientific and non-commercial project that is to be launched at the upcoming EuroPerio9 congress in June. In fact, we already showed it at the last International Diabetes Federation congress because we wanted to gain the attention of diabetes specialists too. If we connect a new medium that people have not experienced yet to our holistic health message, there is
a greater likelihood that they will remember it. So far, I can say it has worked.

**Another way of gaining people’s attention is the Perio Link Award. Can you tell me more about that?**

Oral and general health concern everybody. However, although there are a great number of excellent papers that explore the link between them—well-executed and with solid results—they are usually not available to the general public and this is wrong! Science is for everyone. The only way to encourage people to like science and become involved is to break it down in a way that everybody understands. For this reason, and also to promote research in the field, we established the Perio Link Award.

For the Perio Link Award, the Sunstar Foundation’s scientific committee selected what they felt were the most influential scientific papers of the last three years on the oral and general health link. The nominees for the award were asked to explain their research in a one-minute video. Some nominees had difficulty in doing this because they had never been asked to do this before. In order to spread their scientific research, the nominees were then asked to share their videos and collect votes. The project with the most votes would receive a monetary prize, as well as an expenses-paid visit to this year’s EuroPerio congress in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. It was pleasing to see how some scientists employed their networks to spread their message. Some healthy competition between different teams of course also contributes to spreading the message.

**How do Sunstar’s various product groups relate to each other based on the holistic view that mouth and body are interconnected?**

Industrialisation has largely led to specialisations in products and professions and too often there is no link with other fields. Cross-disciplinary thinkers are valuable to break silos. Sunstar, for instance, connects a number of different business units. So how are toothbrushes connected with motorbikes, brakes or sealants? Simple: health and safety. Inflammation, for example, is common to a number of diseases, such as diabetes, periodontitis, dementia and obesity. It is a connector and a starting
point. When one considers inflammation and ways of preventing it from a holistic perspective, the solution lies in avoiding stress, sleeping well, and ensuring good oral health and quality of life.

Do you think that has something to do with Sunstar being a Japanese company?

Japanese culture definitely has an impact on what we do. Many companies in Japan are very specialised and pursue nothing less than perfection. That of course is something that we strive for as well. Apart from that, Sunstar is a product of our chairman and CEO’s vision. Their business decisions are informed by their collaboration with people from all over the world and being open to seeing things from different perspectives. One could say that they are holistic thinkers themselves.

Have you incorporated Sunstar’s 360° approach to health into your personal life?

Oh yes, very much so. And to be honest, I feel extremely thankful. It was only after starting my job at Sunstar that I heard about the connection between oral and general health, and I have noticed, in talking to friends, that I have become very evangelical about the subject myself! Personally, I have started to think about things I had never considered before, such as the possible role of mindfulness in enhancing mental health and reducing stress through various relaxation methods. There is a proven link between stress and inflammation, and I am interested in holistic ways to reduce it. My work here has greatly changed my way of experiencing life, as well as my way of communicating.

Finally, what are your wishes and recommendations for dental professionals?

My greatest wish is for dental professionals to spend a little bit more time in talking to their patients. A good oral health routine, including using interdental brushes and going to the dentist at regular intervals, is the gateway to good general health. Dentists have a tremendous opportunity in passing on this knowledge to their patients. If they would take an extra five minutes to do that, we would see an overall improvement in quality of life. Of course, it would also help if governments will include oral health and care in their agenda and prioritise it. As political changes are driven by people, we need to support oral care and health professionals in educating their patients. The Perio Link Award demonstrates that the supporting research is there and that the data is excellent. These are no fairy tales. We need to make people aware and empower them.

Thank you very much for the interview.