Despite the achievement of being the first African country to host the World Cup in football, South Africa is a nation with many challenges, such as high rates of crime and HIV/AIDS infections. In addition, the country has high levels of tooth decay, especially in young children. During his visit to South Africa, Dental Tribune International Group Editor Daniel Zimmermann was able to speak with Prof. Sudeshni Naidoo from the Department of Community Dentistry, Faculty of Dentistry, University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town about oral health challenges and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on dental professionals.

Daniel Zimmermann: Prof. Naidoo, very little is known about the current state of oral health in South Africa. Would you describe the current situation for our readers?

Prof. Sudeshni Naidoo: The last National Oral Health Survey was conducted long ago, back in 1989/1990. We conducted another survey approx. 10 years later but only on children up to 15 years of age. Therefore, it is really difficult to comment on the oral health situation in South Africa at the moment.

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To give you an answer to this question, I have to return to the latest South Africa Demographic and Health Survey. In this survey, we found that over 90 per cent of the respondents gave the response “yes” to questions like “Do you have a toothbrush?” or “Do you brush your teeth?”. We were a little bit concerned with this high positive response because we know from smaller studies that low-income households usually cannot afford toothbrushes or toothpaste.

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We really need to start thinking about bringing all these programmes back, particularly with a view to the fact that we have not seen any significant reduction of caries levels in our dental clinics. The experiences of other developing countries with regard to implementation of such programmes could be helpful in this respect.

What other measures should be implemented to improve the situation in South Africa? Besides poor oral health awareness, our main challenges are the huge disparities in various parts of the country and the gap between the public and private sectors. We have private clinics both in medical and dental care that rival some of the best in Europe and North America. In our public sector, however, we have a long way to go to reach anywhere near the kind of services that you might expect to get in Scandinavia, for example.

At the moment, almost 70 per cent of our population seeks treatment in the public sector and cannot afford the private medical care that is available in the country.

Personally, I do not see the number of oral health care workers drastically increasing in the next five to ten years. So what we need to do is to piggyback on other activities that will help us to enhance and improve the oral health status of people in South Africa, such as linking oral health messages into general health messages and being very actively involved in the general health preventive programmes that are currently being implemented. We also have to convince our medical colleagues that the mouth is the gateway to health and that oral health has an impact on his/her general health and consequently, quality of life.

We also need to revisit our water fluoridation legislation. Water fluoridation efforts have been stalled in recent years and even though it is legislated that we incorporate it into our public water supplies, several municipalities have blatantly refused or have been unable to implement water fluoridation measures.

Living with HIV/AIDS in the world. What impact does the pandemic have on health care workers in the country?

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has indeed had a devastating impact on the public health care sector and has overloaded the health care-workers, including dentists. In some parts of the country it is estimated that up to 75 per cent of our in-patients in public hospitals are there on account of some HIV/AIDS-related illness. In addition, South Africa has one of the highest levels of people infected with Tuberculosis, with the centre again being here in the Western Cape Province.

I do not think this is something that is going to go away in the next 10 to 20 years because even though we have improved on the number of people receiving antiretroviral medication, there are still hundreds of thousands of people who are in need but do not have access to it.

Is there sufficient awareness of the disease amongst oral health care workers?

Awareness amongst our health care workers has definitively improved. I think the transition from an HIV/AIDS-denialist to a much more open presidency in the past few years has definitely been a positive development. In fact, this month key government officials, including the President, underwent HIV/AIDS tests, with the results given out in public.

Unfortunately, the reason many oral health care personnel are aware of HIV/AIDS is still largely due to risk and the fear of contracting the virus. To my knowledge, however, there is not a single documented case of transmission within a dental setting.

UWC Faculty of Dentistry is located at Tygerberg Hospital in the suburb of Bellville, northeast of Cape Town. (DTI/Illustration Arid Ocean)