Dr Ashith B. Acharya is an internationally educated forensic dentist specialist from India. In 2005, he helped to set up the Department of Forensic Odontology at the S.D.M. College of Dental Sciences and Hospital in Dharwad which was recently recognised as the nation’s first referral centre for forensic dental casework. Dental Tribune Asia Pacific spoke with him about the consequences of this decision and how it can help to establish the specialty in India.

**Dental Tribune Asia Pacific:** Your department has recently been recognised as the nation’s first referral centre for forensic dental casework. What impact has this decision had on your department and forensic dentistry in India in general?

**Dr Ashith Acharya:** Law enforcement in India has traditionally sought the assistance of government-employed personnel and, therefore, forensic dental referrals are commonly made to forensic medical departments at government hospitals or dentists in government service. However, these professionals are often not necessarily required to have undergone formal training or experience in forensic dentistry.

The recognition of our department sets a precedent for formal involvement of qualified forensic odontologists employed in the private sector to contribute to forensic dental casework. It will hopefully encourage public-private partnership in forensic investigations nationwide as well.

**You have lobbied since 2008 to receive recognition by the Karnataka government. Why did it take so long?**

In order to recognise the private sector and permit its contribution to law enforcement, the government had to hear a number of opinions and undertake visits to ensure that a private organisation like ours is well equipped to deal with the queries of the police.

Our application was delivered to the State’s Home Department in December 2008. The Home Minister then sought the opinion of the Director-General of Police and the Ministry of Medical Education, whose Director and Deputy Director paid a visit to my college and department. Their recommendation to the Home Ministry finally paved the way to the recognition of our department as a referral centre for forensic dental cases in October.

**India appears to lack forensic dentistry experts in general. Why is that?**

The greater focus on dental practitioners and dental clinical specialists in India is perhaps due to the necessity to serve the oral health care needs of the vast Indian population. Less emphasis therefore may have been placed on para-clinical dental specialties such as forensic dentistry. However, this is slowly changing and there has been a steep increase in interest in the field over the last decade.

**“...there has been a steep increase in interest in the field over the last decade.”**

Although no formal course in the specialty is offered by dental colleges in India yet, the Dental Council of India (DCI) recognises two overseas forensic odontology qualifications from the University of Adelaide in Australia and Cardiff University in the U.K. This has opened the door for Indians to obtain formal training abroad and help to bring this knowledge to the country. Formal training may shortly commence in India, increasing the number of forensic dentistry experts further.

**What are the consequences of this lack of forensic experts?**

A major disadvantage is that law enforcement frequently seeks opinions from unqualified and inexperienced personnel, who may not have a thorough understanding of the nuances of forensic dental casework, including evidence collection methods, evaluation techniques and report writing. This lack of expertise has resulted in forensic dental evidence not being used in a manner in which to serve the interest of the judiciary.

**How many forensic dentists would be required to cope with the demand in India?**

It is difficult to predict the number of forensic dental experts actually required, but certainly much more than the handful available today. There are 29 states and a number of federally governed territories in India and many of them are larger in size and population than most countries in Asia. Hence, there is definitely a need for experienced and trained forensic dental experts throughout the country. I recommend that at least one forensic dental centre be established in each state.

**How is forensic dentistry taught in India?**

The recognition of our department sets a precedent for formal involvement of qualified forensic odontologists employed in the private sector to contribute to forensic dental casework. It will hopefully encourage public-private partnership in forensic investigations.

**“Encourage public-private partnership in forensic investigations”**

An interview with Dr Ashith B. Acharya, S.D.M. College of Dental Sciences and Hospital, India
"What undermines routine forensic dental casework in India most is the lack of awareness amongst the general population ..."