



## **Issues in Oral Health**

### **Martin Hobdell, BDS, PhD**

*Dr. Hobdell is currently a visiting professor with the Department of Epidemiology & Public Health at the University College London. Dr. Hobdell was nominated in recognition of his leadership in creating and implementing graduate level certificate and masters training programs in dental public health at the University of Health Sciences in Cambodia and at the Faculty for Odonto-Stomatology in Vietnam. Additionally, he was a winner of HVO's Golden Apple Award in 2007. Dr. Hobdell, an internationally known expert in oral health, developed, in consultation with local faculty, a dental public health curriculum to be taught over a two-year period, mainly by visiting faculty. In addition, Dr. Hobdell served as the HVO program director for both sites, coordinating the assignments of over 20 HVO volunteer faculty, evaluating student progress as well as participating in the training of the dentistry faculty and provincial dental officers. Dr. Hobdell's vision and leadership have contributed to the development of enhanced dental public health research and educational capacity in both Vietnam and Cambodia, and he currently is in charge of dental public health programs in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.*

Oral health is a standard of health of the oral and related tissues, which enables an individual to eat, speak, and socialise in the absence of active disease, discomfort, dysfunction or embarrassment and which contributes to general well being. HVO's oral health programs have been designed to foster good oral health.

One of the biggest difficulties in oral health is the lack of trained oral health professionals in those areas where they are most needed; about 80 percent of the global oral health work force is concentrated in those countries with roughly 20 percent of the global burden of oral diseases. Conversely the oral health of 80 percent of the world's population is cared for by only 20 percent of the world's oral health workforce.

Poor oral health and its associated pain have a direct impact on productivity and hence the incomes of individuals, families and communities. Poor oral health impacts the ability of children to concentrate in school and can severely limit the day-to-day activities of adults. A recent survey of 12-year-olds, carried out in the Lao PDR, for example, found that 41 percent had had difficulty in eating within the past 3 months and that 18 percent had had difficulty in concentrating on schoolwork.

The World Health Assembly (the governing body of the World Health Organization) in May 2007, concluded that oral diseases, "such as dental caries (decay), periodontal disease (gum disease), tooth loss, oral mucosal lesions, oro-pharyngeal cancers, oral manifestations of HIV/AIDS, necrotizing ulcerative stomatitis (noma), and oro-dental trauma, are serious public-health problems."

Dental caries (decay) is one of the most common chronic diseases in children worldwide. Oral diseases have been judged to be the fourth most expensive disease group to treat on a global



scale. Yet there are relatively inexpensive, cost-effective and simple measures to treat and prevent them.

There are three ways in which the HVO oral health volunteer program is addressing these issues: First, by providing access to dental care in sites such as St. Lucia. Second, by teaching inexpensive, cost effective and simple measures to dental students in dental schools, such as in Cambodia, and third, by teaching public health dentists to develop public health policies and programmes to prevent oral diseases and to evaluate and manage these programmes effectively and efficiently in an accountable manner. These latter programmes are principally in Vietnam, Cambodia and in the Lao PDR.