Dr Belinda Poon, one of our pioneer fellows, established outreach voluntary dental service to our local community. Full of energy and yet enthusiastic, we are really pleased to invite her for an interview sharing her beautiful story and indispensable experience with us.

**Can you tell us about how the Happy Dental Programme was founded?**

Before the establishment of the Happy Dental Programme, I had numerous opportunities to participate in certain voluntary projects held overseas thanks to my mentor, Dr Elly Lau, who introduced me to the world of dental volunteering. For the past 10 years, we have visited places like Shanxi, Qinghai (Mainland China), Udon Thani (Thailand), Cambodia and Bhutan. Together as a team, we conducted dental check-ups and provided treatments for local schools, orphanages and villagers.

Not the queue for Japanese ramen, this was the line for seeing the dentists.

From then on, we gathered few more liked-mind fellow dentists which we decided to organise our first voluntary project back to Hong Kong.

“**At the beginning, our target group was elderly people. We made dentures for them...**”

Our project has begun in public housing estate, Pak Tin Estate in Sham Shui Po. At that time, we had a sponsorship from Modern Dental Lab, for making dentures for the senior population living in the area. We were lucky at the time with one of the expert masters from prosthodontics, Dr N.H Cheung, who taught us many valuable practical tips about making a good denture, until now I still appreciate his effort and devotion in our project. Besides, we had a dental technician participating on-site which facilitated our denture work.
We allocated many weekends for the fabrication of dentures for the elderly. However, we soon encountered the problem of lacking volunteers. It was not an easy task to recruit people sparing their weekends with us. In subsequent projects, we learnt only to provide simpler dental treatments like scaling, restorations and extractions for our target groups.

“With the increasing life expectancy among patients with special need, a long-term dental health measure is essential for them...”

In my daily practice, my work offers me advanced training on performing dental treatment under monitored aesthetic care (MAC). We quite often cannot carry out dental treatment for patients with special needs under basic clinic settings. It would be quite costly and difficult to arrange transportation for them to have treatment in private clinics. This would result in poor nourishment which further affects the individual’s overall well-being.

According to the government statistics in 2014, the average life expectancy of mentally disabled persons was 50-60 years. With regard to the urgent need for these people with special need in our society and employing our work experiences, it came to my idea to organise voluntary project focusing on serving this particular group of patients. This idea came to reality which later became our “Happy Dental Programme”.

In the past few years, we launched our project for individuals who are physically or mentally challenged in Hong Kong. We arranged for MAC setup in the residential homes with portable dental equipment.

In this way, patients would be undergoing their dental treatment in their familiar environment. Throughout the years, we have numerous volunteers from our profession together with anaesthetists, our hygienists, dental assistants and many helpers. We all found this project very meaningful.

Dr Poon’s favourite quote:
“Your belief become your thoughts; Your thoughts become your words; Your words become your actions; Your actions become your habits; Your habits become your values; Your values become your destiny.”
- Mahatma Gandhi

Dr Belinda Poon’s mentor, Dr Elly Lau, with the team and our future successor, Dr Annie Au’s daughter, inside her tummy.
What are the challenges ahead?

To comply with the new regulatory regime of Procedure-specific Standards for Day-Procedure Centre, our project for patients with special needs would be put on a pause. In the continuation of our programme, we would love to join hands with other parties to provide our services to serve other communities in Hong Kong.

While in the meantime Dr Poon would be interested in joining back some overseas voluntary projects, going overseas always can offer new perspectives in her life and work, be more grateful about each of our well-equipped clinic back in our hometown. Meeting people living outside of your social circle in different part of the world makes volunteering even more fulfilling and you cannot imagine how long-lasting friendships could be built along the line.

Trip to the happiest country in Asia – Bhutan.
YOMS – Giving Back and Helping Others

Dr Mei Chong
President, YOMS

Since the establishment of the Young Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon Group of Hong Kong (YOMSHK) in 2014, it has been our aim to involve student volunteering as an integral part of YOMS activities. DENTICE is run by students who are dedicated to volunteer locally and outside of Hong Kong to support vulnerable members of the community. DENTICE has now been running for over 5 years providing meaningful services every year.

Working closely with DENTICE was a fantastic experience and truly highlighted how important student volunteering is, not only for the individual volunteering but actually for the positive impact that students were having on the community that they were volunteering in.

We believe that volunteering provides a unique opportunity for students during their time at university outside the regular polyclinics to make a difference to their local community, as well as developing inter-personal skills which lead to building community awareness and building passion towards their chosen career. Student volunteers make significant contribution to organizations and the wider community, not only through the skills but the enthusiasm that they bring and the hours that they volunteer with groups and organizations. This can develop the students’ community awareness and help them integrate into becoming a more caring dentist in the future. Finally, volunteering can help students develop the passion for their chosen career. It is a good motivating factor for students to meet people with similar interests and engage in an activity with a common aim in mind. As a result, students experience a wider range of friendships through volunteering.

For YOMS, we would like to ensure that students have access to high quality volunteering opportunities and support to create the necessary conditions for student volunteering to grow in the future and to enhance the overall volunteer’s experience. These experiences are unlike anything in the world and each year, we hope to feel being a tiny piece in the bigger picture of a wonderful mission.
DENTICE, being a portmanteau combining "Dental" and "Service", is a student-based group established in 2014 by dental students at The University of Hong Kong, which is dedicated to serving underprivileged communities by promoting oral health. Each year we organize service trips and recruit junior dental students to provide basic dental examination and education in compromised area joint-handedly. Since 2014, we successfully organized service trips to orphanages in Fujian, rural villages within Guangxi, Kunming, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Overwhelmingly positive feedback has been received from all the abovementioned projects.

To us, there are undoubtedly limitations in achieving an lifelong improvement in oral health of our participants via an one-off treatment. Instead, what we cherish more is the sustainability of the project and our impacts on their thoughts towards oral health, especially to the younger generations. To some of them, getting rid of a few caries lesions or broken teeth might have solved their long-existing troubles. Yet to many others, the more influential element of our visit is the love and care they perceive from us. Outside the clinical setting, we are always eager to arrange interactive activities with local kids and families, in the hope of letting them know there is someone from a distant world coming to care about their teeth, and to their living environment as well. Dentistry should not be a top-down relationship to our participants. It is their impressions and acceptances to dentistry that makes a lifelong change to their future oral health.

Service itself benefits not only our participants, but also our student volunteers. For many dental students, especially later when they are in the working world, work/school duties, assessments, families, many and many obligations already occupy most of their daily lives. Dentistry is not about how to acquire skills and earn a living. Instead, it is how to incorporate your skills in your life and community. We hope our trip can be a thought-provoking experience for students, especially to junior ones, to think what dentistry can accomplish in our community and where it can branch out besides being a career, offering them an insight on how to live their lives as a dentist at the earlier stage of their career path.