

Engaging the Caribbean Region for Oral Health

The Caribbean Oral Health Initiative (COHI), the School of Dental Medicine, at the University of Puerto Rico, and Colgate-Palmolive convened the summit “Engaging the Caribbean Region for Oral Health”, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on November 13th and 14th, 2013. The event followed conversations between Colgate and key oral health leaders to advance a collaborative approach to improve oral health across the Caribbean Region. Delegates from Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Barbados, and Granada participated in representation of government agencies, the academia and professional groups. Attendance was a success. Forty five people were invited to the summit; a total of forty two participated. This represents 98% of invitees.

II. Scientific Highlights

Dr. Augusto R. Elías-Boneta, Chairman of the COHI, started off the event with a message of unity and an account of the oral and general health needs in the islands.

“With a common history of slavery, plantations and colonialism, we are over 30 million strong. We are Amerindian, African, Spanish, French, English, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, Asian, American, and Middle Eastern, and we have over 500 years of experience learning to live together as Antilleans, to unify in our diversity. We have dealt with the dilemma of difference, with the legacy of separate and broken identities.”

“Our priorities are no longer curative. There is a great need for social justice as a core value in order to increase the focus on health inequalities in the region. We now come together as Caribbean countries in an attempt to help ourselves and each other through synergistic partnering to improve health in the region. Life and its quality depend upon it.”

Dr. Rahul Naidu, Senior Lecturer in Community Dentistry and Coordinator of the Child Dental Health Unit at The



University of the West Indies, was the keynote speaker that provided the context for this ambitious event. Many of the challenges presented by Naidu and colleagues Balkaran and Harracksingh, in their paper Oral health inequalities in the Caribbean, were brought up-front by the country delegates in comprehensive reports of the status of oral health in their countries, as determined by their oral health workforce, government policies and surveillance systems, as well as their research capacities. Reports were delivered by: Dr. Fanney V. Thompson - Senior Dental Officer, Ministry of Health (Barbados), Dr. José Manuel Saldaña – Vice-Minister at the Oral Health Department/Public Health Ministry (Dominican

Republic), Dr. Shameer Ali - Principal Dental Officer, Ministry of Health (Guyana), Ms. Juliet Yolande Powell - Regional Dental Coordinator, Southern Regional Health Authority (Jamaica), Dr. Visha Ramroop - Lecturer Community Dentistry/Unit of Child Dental Health (Trinidad and Tobago) and Dr. Ramón González - Professor, University of Puerto Rico School of Dental Medicine (Puerto Rico).

These are the preliminary findings in line with Naidu's paper:

- oral health in the Caribbean region has largely been a low priority for regional governments;
- public dental services provide most of the care, with private practice treatment being difficult to access for the most disadvantaged groups;
- young children (preschool /primary school-age), are most at risk for dental caries (tooth decay);
- oral health inequalities can only be reduced in the long term by the use of effective and appropriate oral health promotion policy that addresses underlying causes of oral disease;
- good quality data regarding social and economic conditions are not extensive; a research agenda is a priority in order to move forward.

Table 1.

COHI Steering Committee	Dr. Augusto R. Elías-Boneta, Chair Ms. Agnes Rivera, Co-Chair Dr. Rahul Naidu Dr. Yilda Rivera Dr. Ramón González Professor Gloria Nazario Pietri Dr. Elba Díaz Dr. Elaine Pagán
Country Delegates	Dr. Fannye V. Thompson, Barbados Dr. Antonio Mena, Dominican Republic Dr. Shameer Ali, Guyana Ms. Juliet Yolande Powell, Jamaica Dr. Elba Díaz, Puerto Rico Dr. Nigel Camacho, Trinidad and Tobago

A pertinent presentation was made by Dr. Mark S. Wolff, Professor and Chair of the Department of Cariology and Comprehensive Care and Associate Dean for Pre-doctoral Clinical Education at the New York University College of Dentistry to disclose the outcomes of a study made with Colgate-Palmolive in Granada. This research was aimed at reducing the

incidence of caries in schoolchildren and will be translated into effective oral health care interventions.

The enthusiasm of the summit opening continued into the breakout sessions the following day. Participants divided into small groups to discuss themes of interest: Policy Options for Effective Actions, Strategies for an Effective Oral Health Workforce, Disease Prevention and Oral Health Promotion and An Oral Health Research Agenda for the Caribbean. They acknowledged common challenges and then established priorities, successful practices, and opportunities for networking and research collaborations. The majority of the participants stated in the summit evaluation form that the breakout sessions exceeded their expectations.

III. Conclusions

As a result of this initial encounter, collaborative projects are being discussed among country delegates. Resources to promote oral health were identified for research, prevention, health promotion, and health care. Some of these are: 1) the establishment of surveillance systems in oral health; 2) fluoride varnish programs; 3) oral cancer control; 4) post doctoral masters' scholarships in clinical research; and 5) dental curriculum revisions. Details of these and other challenges addressed and recommendations will be published in an upcoming report.

Looking into the future, the COHI was expanded with delegates from each country. A follow up meeting is planned for March, 2015.

References

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2. Naidu RS, Balkaran R, Haracksingh A (2011). Oral health inequalities in the Caribbean. *UWI Today* page 3. (Supplement to Trinidad Guardian newspaper December 2011). Available at: http://sta.uwi.edu/uwito-day/archive/november_2011/online_oralhealth.pdf

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