

Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine – A Dental Specialty Issue Whose Time Has Come?

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The practice of Dentistry in Singapore has advanced rapidly, with the development and recognition of several specialty practices, coupled with the support of established specialty training programmes abroad as well as locally. In this respect, the Academy of Medicine, Singapore (AMS) had led and played a pivotal role in the nurturing and development of several dental specialties in Singapore. It has, as a specialist accreditation body through its Chapter of Dental Surgeons, recognised the following 6 established dental specialties, i.e., Endodontics, Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery, Orthodontics, Periodontology, Paediatric Dentistry and Prosthodontics. In acting as an “incubator” for new specialty development, the AMS, together with the appropriate grouping of new specialists, could also facilitate the development of other dental specialties as practised in western developed countries, such as Dental Public Health, Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Oral Medicine.

This special supplement issue of the *Annals* of the AMS focusing on “Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine”, was commissioned after the successful staging of the 11th International Association of Oral Pathologists (IAOP) / International Congress on Oral Pathology and Medicine (ICOPM) in early August 2002 in Singapore by the Dental Chapter of AMS. It is indeed an appropriate platform to examine the need for the dental specialty of “Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine”. This is to give recognition to the foundational importance of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology (otherwise previously known as Oral Pathology) and the complementary role of Oral Medicine in the practice of Dentistry. It is my belief that this move will encourage our promising young dental graduates who have a keen interest take up recognised training programmes in such crucial, but seemingly with lesser Return On Investment (ROI), discipline. Otherwise, such a rare breed of dental specialists would become extinct, to the detriment of dental education, and clinical and pathologic services needed by the local population. The number of local dentists with additional qualifications either in Oral Pathology or Oral Medicine are not more than the number of fingers in one hand!

Singapore, with a population of 4 million (approximately 1 million are immigrants), still lacks a critical mass of dentists with the additional qualifications of Oral Pathology or Oral Medicine. I therefore submit that a fusion dental specialty of “Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine” is indeed not an unreasonable proposal and would be one which is certainly worthy of our consideration. Given that the Government is trying to inculcate innovative thinking in its population and the “fusion” culture that prevails, creating a fusion specialty like “Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine” is logical. Furthermore, we need only to speak to our overseas colleagues or visit their websites to observe how common is the practice of merging disciplines such as oral pathology, oral medicine, and oral basic and health sciences, including oral surgery in some cases into a single department in an effort to have a leaner structure for the Dental faculty or school concerned. It is thus apparent in the Singapore context that “Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine” is a dental specialty whose time has come!

At this juncture, it would be appropriate to define “Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine”. As this term originates from a fusion of two terms, i.e., “Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology” (OMFP) and “Oral Medicine” (OM), one would expect that the definition will encompass both aspects. Let us see how others define these two aforementioned terms. OMFP is defined by the British Society of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology as “that part of pathology concerned with the scientific study of the causes and effects of disease in the Oral and Maxillofacial Complex, an understanding of which is essential for the diagnosis and for the development of rational treatment and preventive programmes”.¹ OM, on the other hand, is defined as that part of dentistry involved in the diagnosis and treatment of oral disease which may be either localised or a manifestation of systemic condition.² OM has traditionally dealt with disease conditions of the oral mucosa and the salivary glands, including neurological conditions such as orofacial pain.

One can thus define “Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine” as that part of Pathology and Medicine dealing with the scientific study of the causes and effects of diseases in the oral and maxillofacial region essential for the proper diagnosis

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and rational medical treatment of such diseases, which may be either localised or manifestations of associated systemic conditions.

Recognising that the disciplines of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Oral Medicine are integral for the practice of modern Dentistry, special efforts would therefore be needed to encourage and motivate promising young dentists to join such training programmes in order to enlarge the small number of dentists currently practising these specialties. We must also continue to provide for the education and training of undergraduates, as well as to provide histological diagnostic and clinical oral medicine services to our patients.

In this fast-paced world, Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology and Oral Medicine per se are extending in both scope and complexity. This is something that had been derived from the increased understanding of the basic aetiology as well as the interconnections between oral and systemic disorders and diseases. It is well recognised that most symptom complexes are indeed expressions of a rather basic pathology. I do hope that the papers published in this issue would in some ways close the gaps in our knowledge of these 2 dental disciplines.

Lastly, as the guest editor of this issue, I would like to put on record my deep gratitude to the Lee Foundation for generously donating towards the cost of printing this Special Issue on “Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology and Medicine” and to all contributors, especially our overseas colleagues, who kindly submitted splendid write-ups of their plenary papers presented at the 11th IAOP/ ICOPM two years ago. My thanks also goes to the Editorial Team in the *Annals, Academy of Medicine, Singapore* for their patience, concerted efforts and expert assistance, without which this project would not have been successfully concluded.

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