

# Oral health in Belgium: problem solved?

by

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It is an established fact that since the early seventies the occurrence of dental caries is declining, especially in children. This is a phenomenon which is observed not only in Belgium but in most West-European countries. This decline in dental caries has been attributed to a better oral hygiene and the use of fluoride in toothpaste and oral rinses. Although the decline is prominent in the general younger population, studies show the disturbing fact that some layers of the population do not follow this downward trend in dental caries. This is the case with people belonging to socially vulnerable groups, such as institutionalised elderly, medically compromised and disabled patients, deprived population groups and migrants. In these groups an opposite trend is observed: more people showing more dental problems with a large amount of the disease in a small group of the population. One of our future goals for this millennium should be to focus on the reduction of these inequalities in oral health. Parallel to this caries awareness we see a growing interest and increased need for periodontal care, more equally spread over the whole population.

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Another important factor which will have significant consequences for medical and dental practice is the ever growing part of the population which reaches an advanced age. In the dental field there are two major consequences to consider. First, as a result of better oral health, more and more elderly people are still in the possession of (some of their) natural teeth. These seniors will want to have their natural teeth looked after, so whereas in the past the need for dental treatment diminished with age, we now see the opposite. Secondly, knowing that oral health is an important part of general health, we need to be aware that a significant part of oral health resources will have to be allocated to the needs of the dependent elderly people.

Considering the workforce planning, the shortage of dentists and the feminisation of the profession have been observed during the last decade. In combination with the increasing need for oral health care it is obvious that the dental profession in Belgium is facing some serious challenges for the future and that the decline in dental caries in the general population is only the beginning. Focus on prevention, increasing the accessibility of integrated comprehensive primary health care, efforts towards reorienting oral health care personnel including training and education of auxiliaries will be key elements in the organisation of oral health care in the Belgian state of the future.