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The History of Dental Hygiene in South Korea

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This historical narrative highlights the origin and development of the dental hygiene profession in South Korea. The legacy of early American missionaries to Korea includes profound and long-lasting contributions in medicine, education and theology. Many of Korea’s top universities today have their roots in the missionary schools of the late nineteenth century, including Yonsei University, home of the first dental hygiene program in Korea. From Yonsei in Seoul, the dental hygiene profession spread throughout the country, including the American missionary-based program in Kwangju in 1977. Contributions included clinical and didactic education, as well as professional leadership and development. American dental missionaries developed the profession of dental hygiene in Korea, and provided guidance to Korean dentists and hygienists for its growth and expansion.
Introduction

American missionaries had a profound impact on Korean society, having created a legacy in the importation of Christianity, Western education, and medicine, including dentistry. Contributions included clinical and didactic education, as well as professional leadership and development. American dental missionaries developed the profession of dental hygiene in Korea and provided guidance to Korean dentists and hygienists for its growth and expansion. Due to the vision of the early missionaries, dental hygiene is very much a part of the legacy that began in Korea 44 years ago.

Medicine and Higher Education Introduced

In 1884, the arrival of two individuals would significantly alter the course of oral hygiene in the country. The first was Dr. Horace N. Allen (Fig. 1), who went to Korea as the nation’s first Presbyterian medical missionary. He introduced many Western medical techniques which were previously unknown to the people there. Within a year, Dr. Allen initiated the first training program at the Severance Union Medical College and Hospital, and accepted 16 students who would become Korea’s first modern medical doctors.¹ The second individual, Dr. Horace G. Underwood (Fig. 2), a Presbyterian pastor & educator, arrived and eventually founded the Yonhee College, Korea’s first modern college.² This marked the beginning of expansive educational, religious and social developments in Korea.

Modern Dentistry Introduced

Modern dentistry was first introduced to Korea in 1915 by Dr. W. J. Scheifley, who established the Department of Dentistry at the Severance Union Medical College in Seoul. Taking his mission very seriously, Scheifley stated:³

It is with a feeling of tremendous responsibility that I am undertaking to connect dentistry directly with the missionary movement. As far as I can discover, it is the first time this had been tried. The results of our efforts not only depends the future of this work in Korea but some influence will be borne upon the undertaking of this work in other places. At the best our efforts are an experiment.

In 1920, Scheifley left Seoul after his first term as a dental missionary, but his work proved to be successful and had lasting impact. Dr. J. L. Boots and Dr. J. A. McAnlis, both Presbyterian missionary dentists, arrived separately in the port city of Incheon in 1921, but both worked in Seoul.⁴ Dr. Boots focused on training and delivering dental care to Koreans at Severance, while Dr. McAnlis provided dentistry to missionaries and other foreigners residing in the country. Dr. Boots’ dream was to build a separate building for the dental department. After five years of fund-raising in the United States, the first modern dental health center in Korea was built next to Severance Hospital in October 1931. Dr. Boots left Korea in 1939; however, Dr. McAnlis stayed on as the director until 1940.⁵

From 1940-1957, most American missionaries left Korea to escape the persecution of Christians during WWII and the Korean War, although medical work continued under Japanese rule.⁶ Furthermore, at the end of World War II, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel into North Korean and South Korean zones of occupation. In 1948, rival governments were established, with the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea in the North and the Republic of Korea in the South. The Korean War took place from 1950 until a cease fire
was declared in 1953. The discussion that follows refers only to South Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK), due to its democracy and openness to US influence.

In 1957, Yonhee University and Severance Union Medical College merged, taking the first syllable from each of the two schools’ names to become Yonsei University. The Department of Dentistry at Severance Union Medical College was moved to Yonsei University Campus in 1962, and accredited by the Ministry of Education in December 1967. The next spring, 40 students registered in the first formal accredited pre-dental course in the College of Dentistry at Yonsei.

Dental Hygiene Begins in Korea

American missionaries eventually returned to Korea after the Korean War ended in 1953. Meanwhile in the US, the Christian Dental Society (CDS) was founded at the 1962 American Dental Association Convention in Miami, where Dr. John McInnes from Tucson, Arizona, was elected as the first chairman. The vision of the CDS was to address the dental needs of church-related hospitals and clinics all over the world. In 1962-1963, Dr. McInnes and Dr. Roy D. Ribble, CDS missionary dentists, recommended the creation of a program in dental hygiene at Yonsei University. The program was formally proposed to the government in 1964 and opened in 1965 under the direction of Korean dentist Dr. Jhee Heun-Taik. Dr. Jhee traveled to the University of Michigan to observe the dental hygiene program and study their curriculum so that ideas could be adapted for the Korean program.

In 1967, dental hygiene was officially established in Korea, with the graduation of the first four dental hygienists from Yonsei University. The early years of dental hygiene in Korea lacked educational standards and professional guidelines. Within seven years, the Ministry of Health and Welfare established educational standards and instituted the National Board Examination in 1974.

The second dental hygiene program in Seoul opened in 1977. It was a two-year program associated with Kyung Hee University. During that time, the government expanded medical insurance to include dental coverage, with dental hygienists to be employed in all local health departments. This was an incentive to open new programs in junior and technical colleges as many more dental hygienists were needed.

Dental Hygiene Program Expands Beyond Seoul

The first dental hygiene program to open in the ROK outside of Seoul was at Seowon Junior College in Kwangju, in the southwestern province of Chulla Namdo. This work was started in 1977 by American Presbyterian missionaries Dr. Dick H. Nieusma, DDS, and Nancy L. Kane, RDH. They were assisted by Ms. Oh Jung-Sook, RDH, graduate of the Yonsei program in Seoul. (Fig. 5) Dr. Nieusma from Holland, Michigan, was a career missionary dentist at Kwangju Christian Hospital. Ms. Kane was a two-year volunteer dental hygienist from Gate City, Virginia, initially sent to work at the hospital dental clinic with Dr. Nieusma. She was the first dental hygienist in Chulla Namdo.

Both Ms. Kane and Dr. Nieusma agreed to assist Seowon Junior College in establishing the associate’s degree program. The first class at Seowon graduated in 1979. (Fig. 6)
Interestingly, three male graduates were denied permission to take the licensing examination due to gender, so they became dental laboratory technician apprentices. Later, the government relented and now allows men to serve as dental hygienists. On September 5, 2004, Kim Tae-han was elected the first president of the Korean Male Dental Hygienists’ Society.

In 1979, all junior colleges were reorganized by the Korean government into technical colleges. By 1981, all two-year programs were expanded into three-year programs when prerequisite courses were established. Shortly after, the fourth dental hygiene program began at Dankook University in Seoul in 1987. By the early 1990s many new programs opened throughout the country. Faculty were recruited the programs that had opened in the 1960s and 70s, and the profession grew quickly. The dental hygiene curriculum included liberal arts and sciences, oral anatomy, public and oral health, preventive dentistry, clinical practice, nutrition, dental materials and radiology.

The Korean Dental Hygienists’ Association

The first organizational meeting of the KDHA was held in Seoul in 1977. Nancy Kane and Oh Jung-Sook from Kwangju attended the meeting. Ms. Kim Sook-Hyang, a graduate of Yonsei Dental Hygiene Program, was elected the first President. She received her Bachelor’s Degree in Dental Hygiene Education from Loyola University in Chicago in 1975, and returned to Seoul as a leader in the profession and as an educator. The KDHA grew quickly with its mission of advancing the art and science of dental hygiene by ensuring access to quality oral health care. The organization has created several publications, including the peer-reviewed Journal of the Korean Dental Hygienists’ Association.

Definition of Duties and Licensing

Patterned after dental hygiene in the United States, dental hygiene in the ROK began as an auxiliary career under the supervision of a licensed dentist. Duties include scaling, polishing, oral health education and promotion, fluoride, sealants and radiographs. Licensing requirements include graduation from an accredited program with successful completion of a written and clinical board exam. The written board consists of 200
questions in various subject areas, while the clinical exam is a simulated scaling exercise on a manikin.9

Korean dental hygienists practice in private dental offices, community centers, schools, public health centers, corporations, orthodontic clinician programs and as dental assistants. Korean dental hygienists are also trained in office management strategies and serve in front desk capacities.

Growth & Current Status

In 2002, a few Korean universities began offering bachelor’s degrees in dental hygiene. The first four-year program for dental hygiene in Korea was started at Yonsei University, Wonju Campus, in 2002.14 Popular majors for dental hygiene students pursuing a master’s or doctoral degree include education, public health administration, public health management and environmental science. It is now a requirement for dental hygiene educators to have a doctoral degree.

60 years since the Korean War, the explosive expansion of Korean education at all levels has produced drastic changes in both the quantity and the quality of education provided. Currently, South Korea has more than 22,000 registered dental hygienists (RDH) for a population of slightly over 48 million.15 South Korea has 52 three-year diploma dental hygiene programs based on a rigorous core curriculum. There are also 11 four-year degree programs nationwide, totaling 63 dental hygiene programs. The South Korean education system encourages a strong culture of research and innovation among its graduate dental hygienists. Goals for the undergraduate programs include: standardizing curriculum for the three-year programs, implementing new accreditation guidelines and regular site visits.16

The Korean Dental Hygienists’ Association is a member of the International Federation of Dental Hygiene (IFDH).15 The first International Symposium on Dental Hygiene was planned by the American Dental Hygienists’ Association and was held in Italy in 1970.17 The KDHA joined the IFDH in 1992.15 Every three years, the IFDH holds its worldwide conference; the president and vice president of the KDHA represent Korea. In 2010,
the KDHA had more than 22 delegates, including the current President, Kim Won-Sook, RDH, representing the ROK in Glasgow, Scotland. (Fig. 8) Conclusion

2011 marks the 44th anniversary of the profession of dental hygiene in Korea. The legacy of early American missionaries to Korea includes profound and long-lasting contributions in medicine, education and theology. Many of Korea's top universities today have their roots in the missionary schools of the late nineteenth century, including Yonsei University, home of the first dental hygiene program in Korea. From Yonsei in Seoul, the dental hygiene profession spread throughout the country including the American missionary-based program in Kwangju in 1977. Graduates and faculty from that program went on to eventually form the Dental Service International Corp (DSI). In the 21st century, the work of Protestant missionaries continues as Korean dental mission organizations such as DSI have opened dental clinics, dental schools and dental hygiene programs in other parts of the world. Examples include: the All Nations Dental Center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (Fig. 9); the Meerim Dental Clinic in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; and the Charity Dental Clinic in Ulanbataar, Mongolia.18,19

The cycle of education, ministry and healthcare continues. Thanks to the vision of the early missionaries, dental hygiene is very much a part of the legacy that began 44 years ago in Korea: a profession which continues to grow and evolve.
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4. Ibid.

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