



The Apollonian is pleased to interview Professor Corbet, who has kindly volunteered his time to draft an article discussing his dental experiences and his views on our curriculum.

#### **From the UK to HK**

Professor Esmonde Corbet graduated as a dentist from University College Dublin, National University of Ireland, in 1975. Straight after graduation he went to London to work in the Royal Dental Hospital, first in Oral Surgery but very soon in Periodontology. After Hospital training in Periodontology, he became a lecturer in Periodontology at the Royal Dental Hospital School of Dental Surgery and a recognized teacher of the University of London. It soon became very clear to him (and others) that the Royal Dental Hospital site in Leicester Square in the centre of the West End of London was far too valuable for the Hospital to remain on site. He spent many hours in committee meetings planning a new school and hospital to be situated with the St. George's Hospital Medical School in Southwest London, only to have all that effort wasted by the refusal of the local Area Health Authority to accept an expansion to its dental service.

At about the same time, the University of Hong Kong was soon to start to offer dental studies for undergraduates, and so in August 1980 Professor Corbet came to Hong Kong to participate in the establishment and delivery of the dental curriculum. There are three other "survivors" from the original team still with the Faculty: Mr. Wayne Robinson in Dental Technology, Professor Nigel King in Paediatric Dentistry, and Dr. John Dyson in Oral Rehabilitation (who also came here to HKU from the Royal Dental Hospital in London). Professor Corbet was appointed as a lecturer in Periodontology and Public Health in the University of Hong Kong, and having acquired a Fellowship in Dental Surgery in London before coming to Hong Kong, he later completed a Fellowship in Community Dentistry in Ireland. He chose Periodontology partly because, having chosen not to study Medicine when he could have, he was reluctant to return to Medical Studies in order to become an Oral Surgeon, but mostly because the Periodontology staff he had come across were more friendly, welcoming and inspiring than staff in other dental disciplines. It is a series of career choices which he has never regretted, feeling as he does that he would never have and the opportunity to enjoy close to 30 wonderful years in Hong Kong had he not made the decisions he did. So, he has no regrets, so far.

**Professor Esmonde Corbet**  
Professor in Periodontology

### The Faculty's dental curricula

Professor Corbet notes that in the first and second dental curricula at HKU, the teaching in both Periodontology and Public Health was far from being "traditional". There were small group tutorials, and no lectures were given in Periodontology, save for one introduction per year. Project learning was always the corner-stone of student learning in Dental Public Health. However, that was not the case for all the other disciplines, and the Faculty as a whole was reviewed by a panel set up by the University in 1996. The outcome of this review was a recommendation for the curriculum to become integrated rather than consisting of a series of separate courses, and for the students to be encouraged to become effective, independent and collaborative learners through the introduction of a unitary faculty, without departments, and the use of problem-based learning (PBL) to drive the educational aims.

Professor Corbet always tries to emphasize that the features of the current curriculum are that it is an *integrated* curriculum which promotes *collaborative* and *interactive learning*. That is quite a mouthful, so for the sake of brevity, most people refer to it as a "PBL curriculum", but Professor Corbet's view is that that is a misleading and dangerous over-simplification. Students within current curriculum learn through having a wide diversity of learning opportunities offered to them, not just PBL tutorials alone. Learning opportunities are structured to allow for the attainment by students of all the educational aims. The ten years of experience has convinced Professor Corbet that the current curriculum requires higher levels of interest, involvement and support from the teachers of the Faculty than the previous curricula, which when they became settled were fairly 'low maintenance'.

Notwithstanding that observation, his view is that the interest and commitment of the full-time teachers is what makes any curriculum in our faculty work. When professional colleagues ask him what he thinks about PBL he always enquires what has prompted that question. Always it is a complaint that the BDS students do not do enough third molar extractions or veneers. These have nothing to do with PBL. The question he always reflects back to these

professional colleagues is what have the student learned to do, not what (in terms of mindless repetitions) have the students done. If simple repetitions lead to continuous improvements, then all of us would always get better in everything we do. That, life tells us, is not the case.

Professor Corbet is of the strong view that the two former curricula of the Faculty, notwithstanding their deficiencies, produced very good dentists. Curriculum innovations are usually introduced to improve upon things, and in his opinion the improvements required were in the integration of knowledge and skills, and in driving a change from a reliance on what teachers

interest in the introduction of PBL in Dentistry in many countries, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and Thailand, to name but a few, and this interest stems from a desire to produce dental graduates who are capable of adapting to changing times and situations, and who do not just expect to keep on doing what they were told to do in dental school for the rest of their professional lives. Our Faculty is seen as somewhat of a leader in PBL in the region, having the fully-implemented approach that we have adopted. This Faculty hosts the 6th International Conference on PBL in Dentistry in November this year, and has attracted many visitors to view the implementation of PBL in Dentistry.



may have taught towards better equipping young dentists for a professional life-time of learning, adapting, collaborating and serving the people of Hong Kong in the changing circumstances of a Special Administrative Region such as ours. Our Faculty is the only dental teaching institute in the HKSAR and among the primary objectives of the Faculty must be to produce young dentists capable of catering to the changing oral health care needs and demands of the people of Hong Kong.

### Beyond Hong Kong

Within the Asia-Pacific region there is an

The entire dental curriculum works to the extent that it does because of the willingness of the students to learn and acquire the necessary skills. Without grit and determination on the part of the students to maximize all learning opportunities made available, Professor Corbet believes that no curriculum can bring out the best in the students. No professional colleague with the welfare of the profession or the oral health of the people of Hong Kong in mind ought to undermine the determination of the undergraduates to achieve. When Dental Studies were introduced in HKU, the University was primarily an undergraduate

teaching institution. Now the University of Hong Kong is highly ranked in international league tables because of its achievements, not only in undergraduate education but also in postgraduate education, and for its research profile. The demands placed on all the teaching staff at the University in terms of what is expected of them means that, whereas when the Faculty started teachers devoted themselves principally to undergraduate teaching, now the facilitation of undergraduate student learning is just one component of a varied portfolio. Professor Corbet's view is that the degree of commitment to each component needs to be balanced and that the undergraduate students deserve to benefit from exposure to all available Faculty teachers.

#### Keeping fresh

Those educationalists familiar with PBL over long periods do note that facilitators can become bored with working with student groups year-in-year-out on the same problems. Hence to keep facilitators fresh, the problems need to be refreshed as an ongoing commitment. Undoubtedly, for many traditionally busy, multi-tasking clinicians, being confined to a tutorial room with a student group for the best part of three hours, is challenging. The reward comes from observing students learning in progress. Professor Corbet likes to have the students come to the second tutorial having prepared their own material for sharing,

and not bringing in text books. He recalls one former student now a higher trainee, who as an undergraduate said she learned more from the problems facilitated by him than by others because she had to be so well prepared for the second tutorials. Also Professor Corbet believes in returning in subsequent tutorials to anything which students did not know in previous tutorials, so the field is wide open, and admitted and apparent ignorance propels its correction.

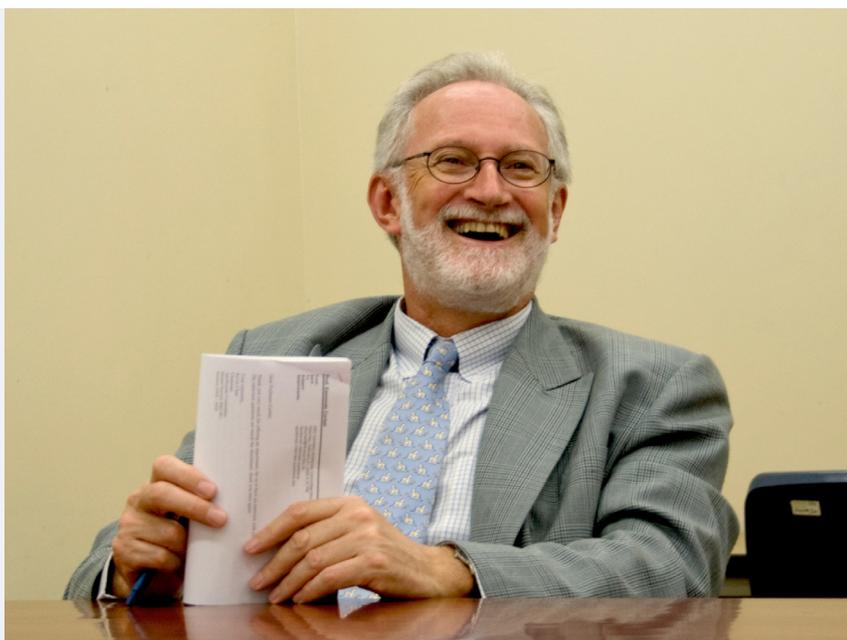
#### Memorable times

The time at the University of Hong Kong has provided Professor Corbet with so many indelible memories, that no one can be singled out. At the time of the "Silver Jubilee" of the Faculty of Dentistry, Professor Corbet was greatly honoured to be asked to deliver the "Not the Jubilee" Lecture: *If the Walls Could Talk*. This necessitated him to look back through his, and others', collections of photographs. That exercise brought

back into focus 27 years of academic endeavours, and reinforced Professor Corbet's view that he has been highly fortunate to have been able to ply his trade here in Hong Kong, working with the undergraduate and postgraduate students with whom he has interacted.

However, for Professor Corbet a perfect day has nothing to do with academia or dentistry for that matter. The perfect day starts with golf, continues to a long, and not necessarily abstemious lunch, followed by a nap and a walk with his dogs in preparation for a concert, opera, play or film, which precedes a fine dinner, shared with those who have also been at the concert, opera, play or film. Hong Kong allows him to enjoy all that in abundance, save when curtailed by work or his conscience. He readily admits, however, that work makes a day only marginally less than perfect. ■

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#### Fun Fill-In-The-Blanks :)

My proudest accomplishment:  
The outcome of my contributions to the development of the dental profession in Hong Kong.

My favorite movie:  
This is two movies, the original and a remake: "The Lady killers" (1955 and 2004 versions), considered jointly as my nomination.

Indulgence:  
Golf vacations

Inspiration:  
Improved oral health and general health and well-being.