STATE OF DENTAL SERVICES IN ETHIOPIA

This is a short rejoinder to an article posted on 11/08/17 on AigaForum and TigraiOnline regarding the state of dental services in the City of Makalle in particular and the State of Tigrai. The author of that article claims to be a professional from Aider Referral Hospital.

My observation of dental services in Addis Ababa, to a large extent, is similar to the situation in Makalle. It is mostly delivered by people with little or no knowledge and skill of dentistry in very unhygienic, unclean environment where basic asepsis and sterilization are unknown. It is a double whammy, as Americans would say; you pay for poor services and get exposed to communicable diseases like Hepatitis, HIV, TB, etc. In short it cannot get any worse than this. I went back to Ethiopia from the USA and stayed in Addis Ababa for a year (July 2014 to June 2015). I have personally tried to make the concerned authorities in the federal Government be aware of the situation. I have copied one of the letters I wrote after I visited the “Dental school” of Addis Ababa University. You will find it at the end of this article. A very high politician, high officials in the Ministries of Health and Education, Addis Ababa University, and the so called “Dental School” have received the letter. I have had a personal audience with the Minister of Health and a deputy to explain the seriousness of the situation. The meeting was facilitated by a top politician that I personally knew from my high school years in Makalle. Suffice to say, I could not find anyone willing to make the necessary changes. In fact, there was active resistance to my recommendations. I am aware that a professor from a dental school in Norway had been trying to help establish a proper dental school in Addis Ababa with no success. I have met the professor and had a very long discussion of his experience, but that is not the subject of this article.

There could be several reasons as to why this is happening. There is a myth that Ethiopians do not have dental diseases. The truth is that Ethiopians are not immune to dental diseases or problems; no one is. Dental diseases are as old as mankind. The prevalence of dental diseases may be lower than in industrialized countries. Dental services may not be a priority. But there will always be loss of teeth due to diseases and accidents. Should we condemn people who happen to lose their teeth to permanent disability? Shouldn't there be a place where people can get dental services in a safe environment? Ethiopia has about 20 medical schools. For a country with a population of about 100,000,000 there is an absolute need for at least one proper dental school. Besides, Ethiopians should have an exposure to the Dental Sciences just like they have exposure to other science subjects.

There is a misconception that the science of dentistry is easy and does not require that much time and resource to teach. Nothing can be further from the truth. Dentistry is an art and a science. It takes many years of training to master the art part and as many years as medical school education to learn the basic health sciences. In addition there is more learning in the basic dental sciences. The physical structure (building), equipment and supplies are much more demanding than a medical school. I visited the so called “Dental School” of Addis Ababa University in August -September of 2014. What I found was a disaster. The physical structure (building, departments, operatories, class room, equipment, supplies, etc) of a dental school was nonexistent in Addis Ababa. By the way, this “Dental School” at Addis Ababa University may have a full fledged budget of an institution, but, the institute does not exist, except in name. Does anyone wonder where the budget it spent? Read a description of the miserable “Dental School” of Addis Ababa University at the end of this article, as I saw it in September of 2014. Most of the academic staff at the “Dental School” of Addis Ababa University are graduates from the former Soviet Union. The former Soviet Union had the worst dental education. So it is the blind leading the blind. I was involved in supervising internship trainees for dentists returning to Ethiopia during the Derg Era. The worst graduates were those from the Soviet Union. They lacked the rudiments of basic dental sciences. They didn't know the ABCs of Dentistry. Graduates from Hungary, East Germany, and Cuba were much
better, probably because of the earlier exposure to quality education before these countries came under Soviet influence. This does not necessarily mean the same was true of the Soviet medical graduates.

I am told there are “Dental Schools” in Jimma Makalle Universities. I have not visited them, but I would guess that they are not much better than the one at Addis Ababa University. In addition there are some private “Dental schools” in Addis Ababa. In a third world country, where a government cannot establish a dental school, can you imagine a private dental school? When I was in Ethiopia about 2 years ago, I was informed that there were about 400 graduates from all these fake schools. They were graduating quacks and letting them loose on the public. They would do more harm than good. That is what we are witnessing now in the country, the chickens have come to roost! It is a disservice to the public and the graduates themselves. I understand this is not done intentionally, but it does not change the reality on the ground. The author of the article on the State of Dental Services in Makalle is complaining that the service is given by people with no licenses. The fact of the matter is that almost all the graduates from the schools in Ethiopia are no better than those with no licenses. That may explain why they are doing what they are doing.

In my opinion, the situation is so dire the Prime Minister of Ethiopia must take charge of it personally and start the establishment of at least one proper dental school in the country. It must be taken as a project. The physical requirements, the development of academic and administrative staff, acquisition of equipment and procurement of supplies, as well as the provision of continuity of consumable supplies need to be planned and put in place before recruiting students. Uganda and Tanzania have done it. Go visit those countries and learn from their experience. You don't have to have one like those in Western Europe or America, but you cannot have one on thin air either. Ethiopia, the African tiger, can afford to do what Uganda and Tanzania have done. Sudan and Kenya have good dental schools too, but that may be too much to ask and too good for Ethiopia!

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