Transforming Dental Training: From Guinea into the Continent of Africa

David Ugai narrates his experience with dental training and highlights the importance of practical training facilities in addressing the challenges faced by dental schools in Africa.



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Introduction and background

TJust days away from the opening of a new training facility at Guinea's only dental school on September 25th that will more than double its capacity, Dr. David Ugai reflects on the transformative journey he and the Université Gamal Abdel Nasser of Conakry have embarked upon together, and the power of collaboration.

Dental care is not a luxury; it is a crucial component of essential healthcare. Without it, not only is people's health jeopardized, but their lives are at risk. Don't just take my word for it—look at the tragic outcomes in nations without sustainable access to dental care, where the result is often inoperable tumors, dental abscesses and early deaths.

The root problem lies in the stark imbalance between the population and the healthcare workforce. In the WHO African Region, there are an average of just 3.3 dentists per 100,000 people () – a figure that's around one-tenth of the global ratio . In nations like Guinea, this leaves much of the population, particularly those living in rural areas, unable to access timely dental care when they need it. The need is particularly high among children, with the WHO citing that 40% of those aged 1-9 in Guinea have untreated cavities. This unsustainable ratio leaves vast segments of the population without even basic dental care. Without addressing this fundamental issue, other efforts will remain inadequate.

In my career as a dental professional, I've gained valuable insights into the crucial role healthcare practitioners play in transforming communities, especially in Africa, where access to quality care can make a profound difference. From the experience of working in different countries, including Guinea, Cameroon, Haiti, and Belize, I encountered a wide range of healthcare challenges and began volunteering with Mercy Ships in 2012.

Here in Guinea, with Mercy Ships, I have felt the strongest calling—to work alongside this nation's experts to help address the pressing gaps in dental education and healthcare that persist within this region. My motivation is driven by faith, a guiding principle that has shaped my career and my desire to give back to communities in need.

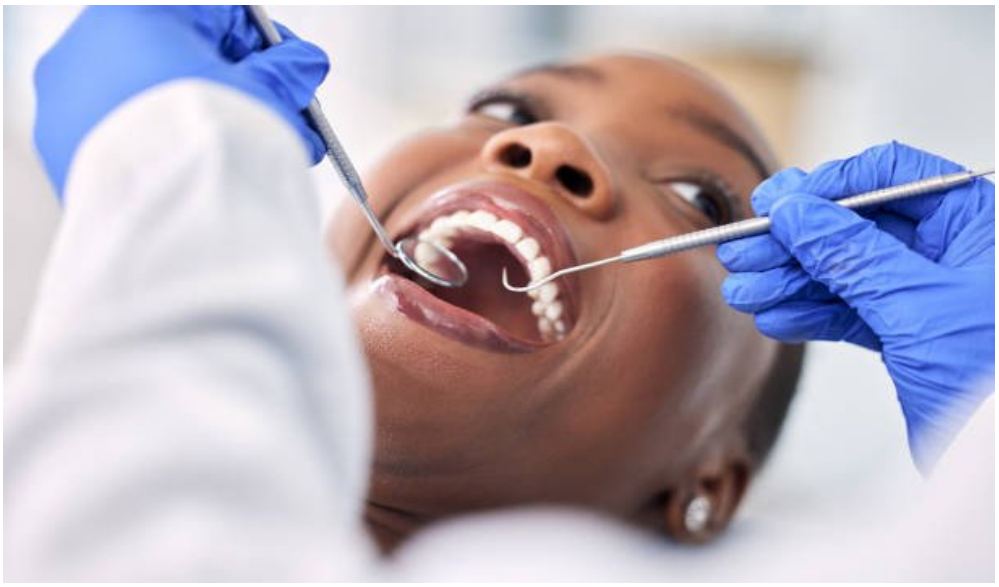
When we examine Africa, the state of oral health is deeply concerning. A staggering 44% of the population suffers from oral diseases, according to a World Health Organization (WHO) report 1. Over the last three decades, the region has seen the steepest rise in oral diseases globally, yet spending on treatment remains shockingly low.

Severely underserved

Like many other African nations, Guinea faces a significant shortage of dental professionals, resulting in a concerning public health issue. We are making progress, but many rural areas are severely underserved, with people forced to travel long distances for basic dental services. Access to proper training and education is limited, which in turn affects the quality of care available to the population.

Currently, one of the most pressing issues in dental healthcare in Guinea, and Africa at large, is the prevalence of dental cavities. The increasing consumption of sugar and carbohydrates, exacerbated by the rise of sugary beverages and processed foods, has led to a surge in dental

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decay. Left untreated, dental cavities can result in serious health complications, such as abscesses that may become life-threatening. Unlike in more high-income countries, where healthcare systems are robust enough to prevent such outcomes, in Guinea, many people lack access to timely dental care, resulting in preventable fatalities.

To tackle these issues, we must go beyond individual treatment and focus on comprehensive solutions.

When I first visited Guinea as a Mercy Ships volunteer in 2012-2013, fresh out of dental school, the dental crisis here hit me hard. I was particularly struck by the lack of hands-on training for dental students. Unlike my education, their studies were almost entirely theoretical, with little practical experience until after graduation.

Many students had to rely on their initiative, seeking private dentists or online resources to fill the gaps in their education. This has resulted in a disparity where only the most motivated students were able to succeed, while others fell behind due to a lack of resources and support. This should not be the case.

This is where the importance of partnership becomes clear, and it is the foundation upon which Mercy Ships' work in Guinea is built. When I returned in 2018, we launched a partnership with Guinea's only public dental school at the Université Gamal Abdel Nasser of Conakry (UGANC), where all the dentists in the country are trained. This collaboration has evolved significantly, and in September 2024, we're expanding the clinical training facility.

Our vision is to provide every student with access to high-quality training that aligns with global accreditation standards. This ensures that when they graduate, they are well-prepared to treat patients not only in Guinea but in any part of the world.

The expansion of the clinic and the addition of practical training facilities are critical in addressing the challenges faced by dental schools in Africa. Funding remains a major issue, impacting infrastructure, human resources, and equipment. Ensuring that teachers are well-compensated and that students have access to necessary materials is essential, as dentistry is a costly field to support. Additionally, there are shortages of specialized faculty and resources.

Our expanded clinical training building will more than double our capacity for students. This expansion aims to provide the resources and real-world experience needed to overcome these challenges and develop skilled dentists. We have also achieved accreditation from the Ministry of Higher Education in Guinea, which helps maintain quality standards.

Impact

Looking ahead, we plan to pursue international or sub-regional accreditation within the next 5 to 10 years to further enhance the program's quality and impact. Our goal is to ensure that every student, regardless of their background, receives the training required to excel and contribute to improving dental care throughout Africa.

The work we are doing at the dental school is not a quick fix, nor do we claim to solve all of Africa's dental care challenges. However, by focusing on training and expanding the health workforce, and empowering local health professionals, we can begin to close the gap. As more dentists are trained and equipped to practice in rural and underserved regions, we will see a ripple effect. These dentists, trained to meet the needs of their local populations, will be the ones to shape the future of dental care in Guinea and beyond.

The partnership continues to expand with UGANC and specializations in a leading dental postgraduate program in Morocco. Today, students at UGANC and its related program in Morocco come from various African nations, including Benin, Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau, and Sierra Leone.

As I emphasized, dental care is not a luxury but a critical frontline in essential healthcare. These confident professionals will return to their countries, establishing new schools and strengthening dental care in the region.

Gamal's new extended clinic is due to open on Sept 25th. Press and other interested parties can follow the story by registering here https://apo-opa.com/gamal-dental-clinic-en/