

Meet the President

Having served in nearly every conceivable position and strata there is in the Federation Dentaire Internationale (FDI), Datuk Dr Ratnanesan has finally reached the peak of the hierarchy, but at what price? The gallant FDI President-to-be opens up to *Dental Asia* about the struggles and sacrifices from his heavy commitments towards organised dentistry.

By DANNY CHAN FROM KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

Come 27th September, Datuk Dr Ratnanesan will be sworn in as the new FDI President during the opening ceremony of the 2001 World Dental Congress. This single occasion would represent two milestones in his life – being inaugurated as FDI President and the commencement of the 2001 World Dental Congress in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Among other things, the qualified oral surgeon has put his career and private practice on the line for this very day to come to pass.

Two years ago, he embarked on a trailblazing campaign for the FDI Presidency, the success of which represented a double first for Malaysia. Through sheer persistence, he had not only become the first FDI President-Elect to emerge from a developing country; he had also marshalled his team-mates from the Malaysian Dental Association (MDA) to win Malaysia's bid to host the 2001 FDI World Dental Congress in Kuala Lumpur.

However, the back-to-back successes came with a hefty price tag for the team of volunteers, and in particular, Dr Ratnanesan. It was, in his own words, a "financially and emotionally draining experience".

In this interview, Dr Ratnanesan



The incoming FDI President is a veteran in international dental association circles.

shares openly about how they managed to beat the odds – twice – to create dental history both at home and for the rest of Asia.

He also talks about the doubts and pre-conceived notions which often worked against them, but also brought the Asian values of persistence and never-say-die mentality to the fore.

On a brighter note, he enthusiastically welcomes the entire dental sector to attend the Congress. Dr Ratnanesan wants everyone to know that this is an event not to be missed. He couldn't have made a bolder state-

ment to the effect: "We are sparing no effort to ensure that it is the best-organised FDI World Dental Congress ever held." DA

Q: What are some of the things you are most looking forward to when you take over as the new FDI President?

A: I was filled with trepidation and apprehension when the full impact of the immense responsibilities and tasks ahead dawned on me. Having participated actively at levels of FDI deliberations – Executive, Committee, Council and General Assembly levels, I am now confident.

I am indeed looking forward to it. The FDI is the umbrella organisation of more than 146 member associations from 135 countries, representing about 750,000 dentists. Being the truly authoritative, independent voice for dentistry worldwide, it has to face obvious challenges.

The dawn of the new millennium is most auspicious. As Chairman of the Committee for the Missions to Actions Committee, I have to present the draft Strategic Plan for FDI of the future. It shall lay the strategies, role and future direction of the FDI – if not for the new millennium, then certainly for the next decade.

Having been deliberated upon and debated over at the mid-year Council Meeting in London in June, it shall have to be presented to the General Assembly at the end of September in Kuala Lumpur at the FDI World Dental Congress.

At the end of General Assembly meetings would be the Grand Opening Ceremony. The Guest-of-honour shall be our Honourable prime minister Y.A.B. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will officiate at the Ceremony. I shall, at this spectacular Ceremony, be installed as the President of the FDI.

I certainly look forward to that. I am committed to ensure the deliberation and adoption of the Strategic Plan to launch "FDI of the Future" and its actual implementation – which has far-reaching implications and positive consequences for the FDI.

Q2: What are the roles and responsibilities of an FDI President?

A: The President is the principal official representative of the FDI in its relations with governments, the dental industry and international organisations. As such he has an extremely high profile and carries the flag of international dentistry in all fora. This is a huge responsibility. The conduct of the office is crucial to the development and enhancement of the FDI.

Naturally, he presides at all official functions of the FDI, in particular at the World Dental Congress, and chairs all meetings of the Executive and Council.

Q3: What did it take for you to become the FDI President?

A: It was an extremely tough decision to attempt it in the first place. But deep down I felt I had the qualifications – both academic and in terms of contributions to local, regional and international dentistry. I had at that point of time been President of the

"I have always felt that I am the best judge of myself. I continuously assess myself in terms of strengths and weaknesses. My strength is that if I am given a responsibility, I would do my utmost to deliver, despite the toll it takes on me – physically, emotionally or financially.

– Dr Ratnanesan

Malaysian Dental Association for a total of 6 terms; Editor, Vice-President, Treasurer and FDI Council Representative of the APDF/APRO for about 13 years in all. I was also President of the Commonwealth Dental Association from '94 to '97; and FDI Councillor for 3 years.

I felt I had a wide repertoire of experience and therefore was eminently qualified. However, the member associations and the General Assembly had a different perception and mindset. All the Presidents of the FDI had been from developed countries; with multiple votes no less. They were not completely prepared to accept someone from a developing country with only one vote.

I had initially wished to launch my campaign later after a second term of 3 years as FDI Councillor. But

the thought of being installed in my home country during the FDI World Dental Congress in Kuala Lumpur in 2001 was overpowering. Few presidents of the FDI had indeed the privilege. A little persuasion from well-meaning friends sealed my fate. I was convinced.

Having made the decision to contest, I embarked on an intensive campaign for about 6 months. It was an uphill task. The support of my own association was a morale booster. But there were mixed reactions elsewhere. At the end of the day, the strength and support of the developing nations held sway.

The competition was intense. I took on two giants of the profession. The election was held in Mexico City in 1999. I was up against Dr Reginald Hersion from Australia, who was the incumbent speaker of the General Assembly, and had served the FDI in various capacities, for years. The other candidate was Dr Jo Wilmes, President of the German Dental Association, who was also an FDI Councillor. The odds were obviously stacked against me. A candidate must have a majority of 50 per cent of the votes of the delegates present and voting.

In the first ballot, I had the majority votes but still short of 50 per cent. A second ballot was called, while the candidate with the lowest vote was omitted. The results of the second ballot broke the deadlock and I emerged with a 53 per cent majority.

Though the victory was narrow, it was sweet and was made possible only through divine grace.

Q4: What do you consider as the strengths that will make you a good FDI President?

A: I have been repeatedly criticised. It goes with the office you hold. I have always felt that I am the best judge of myself. I continuously assess myself in terms of strengths and weaknesses.



Datuk Dr Ratnanesan has every reason to smile: He would be inaugurated as the new FDI President during the upcoming World Dental Congress in his own country, Malaysia.

My strength is that if I am given a responsibility, I would do my utmost to deliver, despite the toll it takes on me – physically, emotionally or financially. I believe I am fair and very approachable. I can be extremely firm but compassionate.

My forte is that I make decisions based on sound judgement, principles and most of all, common sense. I can usually appraise a person or situation quite well. I am deeply committed to the sense of fair play. These qualities should hold me in good stead for the role of FDI President.

I have the ability to transcend all barriers – race, colour, creed, culture and communicate easily to people of all walks and station in life. I believe in global peace and harmony and fellowship amongst the peoples of the world.

As regards my weaknesses, there are too many to enumerate.

Q5: You are the first FDI President to emerge from a developing nation. Do you feel that it is about time?

A: Yes. I am the first President to emerge from a developing nation. Is it about time? Not necessarily. One must have the qualifications and ability to appraise the demands and responsibilities of the office and

the various issues that confront the profession.

Most of us do not have a global perspective because of our lack of exposure as we are deprived of opportunities. Further, it must be realised that about 85 per cent of the subscriptions to the FDI is from developed countries.

Q: You fought long and hard for the FDI Congress to be held in Malaysia. Can you share with us some of your struggles?

A: The winning of the invitation to host the FDI World Dental Congress in Kuala Lumpur in 2001 was my ultimate challenge. I first attended an FDI World Dental Congress in 1985 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. It was a revelation. Our Honourable Prime Minister Y.A.B. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad en visit to Belgrade, had been impressed by the Sava Convention Centre and had indicated that he would like to build a similar one in Kuala Lumpur. It gave me ideas.

The Putra World Trade Centre was built in 1986. In 1987, I was Organising Secretary of an International Dental Conference, which proved most successful. We became familiar with the layout, facilities and the shortcomings of the Centre. However, the

Malaysian Dental Association pressed on to host local, regional and international conferences under my leadership at the PWTC, with the fervent hope that we shall win the bid to host the FDI Congress in Kuala Lumpur.

1999 was our first choice – I had verbally presented the case for Kuala Lumpur in 1988. But on learning the demanding rigours of such application, rose to the task and submitted comprehensive invitations from 1989 onwards, with supporting letters from the Ministers of Health and the Government virtually annually. Every forum available was utilised to reinforce our invitation.

Initially, it was most discouraging. Unkind remarks were made as regards the suitability of Kuala Lumpur. Various familiar reasons were given.

However our spirit was unfazed but we became more determined. Several member associations, the APDF/ APRO, other regional organisations and FDI Council members were incessantly lobbied. Such that in September 1995, the FDI Council, with the support of the International Dental Manufacturers, awarded the FDI World Dental Congress 2001 to Kuala Lumpur, subject to agreement

between the FDI and the Malaysian Dental Association.

Q: How did the Malaysian team react after winning the hosting bid?

A: It was most unfortunate that several of my colleagues were not convinced of our chances. The sturdy few left celebrated with a party, Malaysian style, which continued on our return to Kuala Lumpur – till the daunting reality of hosting such an event fell upon us and the responsibilities and resources required.

Q8: Do you often stop and ask yourself "what did I get myself into" or "is it too late to turn back now"?

A: Repeatedly, I was faced with that dilemma of "what had I gotten myself into" and that it was a point of no return. It was just too late to turn back. With my personal financial resources depleting rapidly, I was indeed in a predicament. As a solo practitioner, my practice was my only source of income.

Q9: What do you see yourself more as: A) A role model for dentists in Asia ; or B) A dental ambassador for developing nations?

A: I do not see myself as a role model as I have many imperfections. As for dental ambassador for developing nations – yes; and very much so. My message is that if anyone sincerely sets a goal and is deeply committed to it, he will overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and achieve that cherished goal.

Q11: Since the entire organising committee is made up of volunteer dental professionals, did it present itself as an obstacle since most or all of them were serving on a part-time basis?

A: It certainly does. It calls for total dedication and selfless sacrifice from all the volunteers who are dental professionals and colleagues. As all of us have very limited resources, the burden on us has been awesome. I truly commend them.

Q12: How are the preparations coming along?

A: The preparations are coming along extremely well. The inspiring support of the Honourable Prime Minister YAB Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the cabinet and the Government has truly encouraged and motivated us. We are sparing no effort to ensure that it is the best organised FDI World Dental Congress ever held. It is incumbent upon us to prove our organisational capabilities and commitment.

Q13: Which is the highlight of the event, in your opinion?

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The Ceremony will be officiated by the Honourable Prime Minister Y.A.B. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad – something we are positively delighted about. An attendance of 10,000 is expected. It shall be a glittering, colourful affair that shall keep the delegates spellbound for the entire duration. Everyone is invited. This will be followed by a reception which will be most generous in quality and quantity of food and drinks – true to the character of Malaysian hospitality.

Q14: So far, how is the response from the region?

A: The response thus far can be

improved.

The foreign delegates are increasing, particularly from Europe and the Americas. The number of the local participants registering is most encouraging. However, the support from particularly our immediate neighbours, Singapore and Indonesia, is not significant.

Q16: What makes Malaysia a suitable host country for the first FDI Congress of the new millennium?

A: Malaysia is particularly qualified to host the FDI World Dental Congress in the new millennium as it has all the ingredients. It is a country where the 'act' comes together – it is multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious.

Other important aspects are that this is a peaceful and extremely safe country. For tourists, it is true value-for-money. Whether food, hotel accommodation or internal travel – Malaysia provides all these at affordable rates. Last but not least, our strength lies in our hospitality.

Malaysian hospitality is truly unique and needs to be experienced firsthand.

Q17: How has your practice and personal life been affected since you started involving yourself in volunteer work for associations? How long has it been?

A: Both my practice and personal life have been affected terribly. It is an extremely heavy price to pay; and I am not compensated especially financially for loss of earnings. Unlike in developed nations where the official is compensated totally for loss of income.

This is an issue that must be taken seriously and addressed. I have been involved in organised dentistry and other volunteer organisations in Kuala Lumpur soon after I established practice here in 1983.

Q18: Has it been worth the while?

A: It has been a heavy price to pay and it is taking its toll. But it has all been worth the while. DA

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