

The Oral Epidemiology Conference

The necessity for more accurate information on the dental status and oral health care requirements of the major population groups in South Africa has become an urgent priority for future dental health planning according to the experts who attended the Oral Epidemiology Conference held under the auspices of the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) in Cape Town in October 1978.

In its recommendations the Conference proposes that a pilot study should be undertaken on a country-wide basis including samples from all the major population groups. The objectives of the survey should be to obtain reliable base-line information about caries and periodontal disease experienced in the different population groups and to assess the needs and demands of the population with respect to these diseases.

This type of national survey to be successful, would have to be conducted using standardized methods and criteria, stressing the need for a central co-ordinating body. The Conference felt that the establishment of a co-ordinating body must receive urgent attention and should, when constituted, include representatives from the Medical Research Council, the Department of Health, the Universities and the Dental Association of South Africa. This central co-ordinating body would not only undertake epidemiological surveys such as the proposed national survey and the longitudinal studies, but would also establish a dental health education centre and actively stimulate oral epidemiological research in the country. Ways of implementing these ideas are under consideration by a steering committee consisting of Prof. C.W. van Wyk, Director of the MRC Dental Epidemiology Group at the University of Stellenbosch, Prof. P.E. Cleaton-Jones, Director of the MRC Dental Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, Dr. A.G. Dreyer, President of the Dental Association of South Africa, and Dr. L.T. Taljaard, Head of the Department of Health's Dental Services.

The importance of longitudinal studies in long term epidemiological planning was also stressed by the Conference. These studies should evaluate any changes in the patterns of caries and periodontal disease amongst the population, as well as the efficiency of various types of dental care delivery systems and preventive measures.

Preventive action such as our National Dental Health Week programme, aimed at the pre- and antenatal clinics, pre-school and school children was strongly advocated by the Conference delegates, as was the investigation of alternatives to water fluoridation, such as salt fluoridation, fluoride rinses and school water fluoridation. The continual development of the preventive awareness of all health service workers (doctors, dentists and nurses) as well as that of the teaching profession, by including relevant courses in their training programmes was regarded as an important priority in preventive campaigns.

The Conference also evaluated the specific epidemiological requirements pertaining to mucosal lesions. It was felt that a survey on a national scale of mucosal lesion occurrence was not necessary at this stage, but that pilot studies devoted to the investigation of specific lesions in certain population groups was relevant. This is particularly so in the cases of certain premalignant lesions as the introduction of preventive measures in these cases cannot be left unattended.

This issue of the *JOURNAL* is devoted to the fluoridation theme, the cornerstone of all prevention philosophies. Nationwide symposia on the importance of restoring the optimum level of fluoride in the public's drinking water were advocated by Dr. Johan de Beer, Secretary for Health, on the TV programme *SPECTRUM* last November. We hope to publish more details of the venues for these symposia shortly as it will be vitally important for the profession to actively support the fluoridation panel at these meetings.