As a young dentist at the World Health Assembly

This year the 72nd WHA took place in Geneva May 21-26. For the first time ever IADS was represented there as part of the IFMSA delegation of mostly 50 medical students from 33 different countries. This week was truly life changing and motivational for me as a young oral health professional and hereby I would like to share my experience with all of you and get you motivated as well.

The World Health Assembly is an amazing event held once a year in the United Nations office but also in several other institutions all over Geneva. It is the highest assembly of international health leaders and country representatives where the newest global health plans are being discussed. This year’s WHA was focused on Universal Health Coverage (UHC). It basically means that in the future every single person in the world should have access to healthcare. Here is the official wording as well: “UHC means that all individuals and communities receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship. It includes the full spectrum of essential, quality health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care.” (WHO)

Our delegation’s WHA started off 5 days before the actual event with a training on global health organized by the IFMSA. This time was already the sixth preWHA and I must admit that it was an extremely educational and active intro to the big assembly. Those were five days that featured multiple global health specialists speaking in thematic sessions. The sessions were divided into 4 streams: Universal Health Coverage (UHC), Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), and Ending Discrimination in Healthcare. Most certainly our delegation didn’t just dive in but had already been working for several months before the event within these streams writing policy briefs and statements to be presented at the WHA.

During the World Health Assembly committee sessions, where also the before mentioned statements were read out, are held at the Palais des Nations and hundreds of side events and meetings occur all over town. As representatives of the future generation of healthcare professionals, our delegation was also actively present during all kinds of events at the WHA. The aim was to contribute to different talks from a youth perspective and also actively state that we, the future of global health, are knowledgeable and motivated enough to be taken as equal partners.
Thanks to the new Director General of the WHO, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, this organization has become more open and welcoming for youth to join in and give their input. As a great example a new WHO entity, the Youth Hub, was initiated at the end of last year of which IADS is also a member of together with several student and young professional organizations in healthcare. As you all can imagine these kinds of big global events are places where to spot important people and have meetings to advocate for what you care about most. In my case that is oral health. Listening to various panel discussions and presentations I never saw a single oral health specialist being included among the speakers nor oral health problems even being mentioned among all the others. At first this made me very sad but eventually I understood that this should be taken as motivational material and an open opportunity to actually do something for oral health globally. So I went through the agenda and managed to schedule some meetings for the week. The first meeting was after the gerodontology conference organized by the Taiwanese Dental Association. There were very interesting presentations and it was literally the only oral health event at WHA. But there was present also Dr. Corrado Paganelli, the past president of ADEE and current president of IFDEA with whom we chatted quite a lot about the future of dental education and dentistry. During the week I also visited the FDI Office to discuss about further plans for cooperation and advocacy work. Our mutual aim is to become more open and incorporate our members also into the everyday work and advocacy work done about oral health. All these big organizations are just the voices of their members and in order to make meaningful decisions it is of utmost importance not to leave anyone out. Last but not least I also met the Director of the Oral Health department of the WHO- Dr Benoit Varenne. As mentioned previously, the WHO is becoming more and more welcoming towards the youth and during this meeting those were also the take home messages.

It is important for us as dental students to understand that the dentistry of tomorrow stands for global health and collaborates tightly within and outside the healthcare system. In order to be knowledgeable about the future a new generation of dentists will be needed to pave the road. This means that starting from this year IADS will be focusing more on bringing global health issues to the everyday work of the association. We are planning trainings, webinars and maybe some cool internships for our members, so most certainly- stay tuned! Now is the time for change and IADS is proud to start training a new generation of global oral health leaders.

By Ave Põld,
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