

## FEATURE ARTICLE:

# *Denturism, the profession of Compassion:*

by Duffy Malherbe

### Abstract:

Dictionaries describe the meaning of the word **Compassion** as sympathetic caring and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others, especially the weak and deprived. Other Synonyms are:

empathy, caring, concern, warmth, mercy,  
sensitivity, tenderness, understanding, gentleness,  
humanity, kindness, consideration, charity, benevolence.

One could easily add Denturism to the list of synonyms for the word Compassion, as Denturists worldwide consistently demonstrate their committed caring and benevolence towards denture wearers. Wherever the profession is practised, in more than 40 countries and states, Denturists often go more than the proverbial extra mile to reach out to those in need of dentures, often at an expense to themselves.

The satisfaction of seeing the transformation in human dignity and self-esteem reflected in a patient's eyes, when the new denture is placed, is the reward that motivates Denturists universally!

### Introduction:

How does an Artist capture someone's portrait on canvas, without meeting the subject personally? Making a denture without access to the denture wearer, solely on the instructions of a go-between is inefficient and frustrating to all concerned and the patient is often the ultimate loser. Society is much deprived without the direct denture services of Denturists.

The Oral Health Team (OHT) needs the expertise of all its members, each with their own intrinsic value, to jointly serve the patient's oral health needs. Service efficiency suffers when business considerations interfere with common sense and challenges patient-centred Dentistry.

The Denturist and Dentist teamwork is as integral to the success of the prosthetic treatment of the patient, as the analogy of the Flight Engineer and Pilot's successful teamwork, or an Architect and Civil Engineer's building construction teamwork.



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The absence of the Engineer would make either example unworkable and unsafe. Equally, the absence of the clinically trained, 'Dental Engineer' creates a huge gap in the effective prosthetic treatment of patients. Likewise, Dentistry and the OHT needs the services of a Denturist to balance the oral health needs of society.

The South African, clinically trained denture professional remains an oxymoron as they only practise outside the South African borders. The perpetuated absence of a Denturist Register is created by the Dentists' monopoly in the supply chain of dentures, which retains a roadblock against the altruism of free or affordable dentures to an entire indigent population. It is an inexcusable paradox that the Dental Association understands the need for dentures by the vulnerable sectors of society, but deliberately obstructs the deployment of Denturists to serve those needs!

### The Importance of dentures:

The profound effect of tooth loss (as a disability) on various aspects of oral health and general health has been well recorded. It is vital to restore the mouth, by replacing the structures of the lost teeth and soft tissues, otherwise health and quality of life will be compromised. Inadequate dentures or lack of dentures may both result in poor oral health. For persons without all or some of their natural teeth in one or both arches, and/or who cannot afford alternative hi-tech rehabilitation procedures, the use of a complete or partial denture and the quality of the denture used, are important aspects of their oral health, which impacts on their general health, social functioning and nutritional health. Teeth are essential requirements for speech and mastication and provide structural support to muscles in the face and form the human smile.

Edentulism is devastating both aesthetically and emotionally, and also impacts socially. The dignity, appearance and self-esteem of those who have lost their teeth is compromised. People value the importance of an attractive smile, and express love by kissing. When the face is affected by tooth-loss, there is a high demand for optimal, functional rehabilitation that looks natural. Having dentures or not, affects the emotional, psychological and social well-being of denture wearers. The social stigma attached to Edentulism impacts negatively on an individual's self-esteem and employability, which may hinder elevation out of the poverty spiral. In many deprived communities, the provision of dentures, becomes an integral part of poverty alleviation.

The UN formulated a Human Rights Charter, which has been entrenched in the Constitution of almost all nations. Individuals have a constitutional right to a balanced diet and rehabilitation. The elderly have the right to be treated with dignity. The speech-impaired, the deaf, the blind, and the physically disabled have the right to be rehabilitated to their full human potential. Being edentulous is a dental disability and any barrier to obtaining basic dentures becomes a handicap. Access to affordable, efficient Denture-care is indeed a fundamental Human Right! Those with a toothless disability, especially the poor and the old, indeed have a basic human right to be treated with dignity and the opportunity of rehabilitation to their full speech, mastication and oral health functioning, through access to an affordable safe denture service and the freedom of choice. Lack of age should never prevent anybody from the ability ..... to SMILE!

### Denturists care:

Denturists are exceptionally talented individuals who meet the prescribed standards and the only category specifically trained to serve only denture-patients. Their compassionate dedication and benevolent contribution in serving their communities, is exemplary. Denturists are the popular service provider of choice; patients love Denturists and when necessary drive or fly long distances to obtain their expert services. All people deserve the freedom to choose a Denturist, because Denturists Change Lives – One Smile at a Time.

Privately practicing Denturists have independent autonomy. They may practice in a personal capacity, or as a juristic person, in association or group practice with other Oral Health professionals, or be appointed in civil service. Denturism may include Geriatric Care for institutionalised patients and Mobile Services. This is especially useful to bridge barriers faced by the disabled and the elderly in retirement facilities and subsequently all denture patients in remote rural settings.

The prevailing global economic crisis has stimulated reforms in all types of services. Simultaneously, public expectations and an increasingly aging population require an efficient and more feasible prosthetic service without compromising standards. The conventional monopolies still prevailing in some undemocratic locations, which restrict all aspects of denture supply through a fragmented go-between system, has surpassed its usefulness. For the past 80 years, a pattern emerged globally, where the chain of supply is shortened and allows direct interaction with the manufacturer, providing a more proficient service at a better fee. Direct denture provision through Denturists, provide consumers with the freedom of an alternative choice of service provider. This supplementary service frees up the hands of Dentists to fight oral disease and deliver more advanced clinical services, which affirms the importance and diversity of the Oral Health Team.

Since the early humble years the profession have grown into a globalising profession, with the development of international baseline competencies, first-rate retraining and upgrading opportunities and matured to come of age, taking up its standing amongst other universally recognized and valued professionals.

### Unsung heroes:

Denturists change lives by being willing to serve in areas where there are few if any oral healthcare providers. Jose Rene Martinez, a Michigan Denturist, risked going into Cambodia during the hepatitis and malaria epidemic to serve the denture needs of the people who had little or no access to dental care because of the political revolution that resulted in the massacre of their citizens and professionals. In the human catastrophe, more than 3 million people were murdered. Jose, with a missionary heart and his Denturist skills, went into Cambodia to serve the people (The National Denturist / Summer 2014).

Lori Pecha considers it a blessing to be able to serve denture wearers in nursing homes, the disabled, home-bound and developmentally challenged individuals in Spokane Washington, by visiting them in her Mobile unit. She considers the opportunity to serve this difficult market as a ministry. She loves her patients, even though they present her with an incredible challenge. She had been bitten by patients and their dogs, run over by an electric wheelchair, had her arms twisted. She had been kissed and hugged. She also received a puppy for payment. Lori gets referrals from other Denturists, Dentists, nurses and nursing home attendants. Lori's passion to serve this market of special people, epitomises the selfless caring that Denturists aspire to (The National Denturist / Spring 2012).

One only needs to look at statistics to know that Glen Anderson's talent is required in the area where he chose to have a denture clinic. This area of Kentucky is ranked the lowest amongst all 436 congressional health districts in the health index of the American Human Development studies and research shows the largest number of prevailing dental care needs. Drug abuse contributes to the dental crisis with 65% of the population having some or all of their teeth missing. Denture needs are at a critical level and are not being met by the dental communities. Glen accepts referrals from community benevolent organisations, striving to help these individuals and is rewarded by "thank you" notes from patients who were able to secure jobs and "turn their lives around" after having their confidence and self-esteem restored. Despite his Denturist qualifications and the obvious need for affordable Denture services, Kentucky legislators have yet to recognise his profession, to allow Glen the freedom to serve this need unencumbered. However, he continues to serve, working with a dentist (NYT – In Kentucky's Teeth, Toll of Poverty & Neglect).



Only selfless caring could motivate one to fly 3 000 miles into the freezing ice tundra of Nunavut province in Northern Canada and stay for 3-4 weeks, with the sole mission to provide Denturist services to the Inuit people of that desolate area! It is the largest Northern Territory of Canada, close to Greenland and the Arctic region, with frigid temperatures of -15°C to -40°C, including various isolated communities, whose populations range between 250 – 1900 individuals. Several Denturists from Ontario have been contracted by the *Northern Health Placement* services to go through the registration and licencing process to practice Denturism in Nunavut. They are required to provide both clinical and laboratory procedures for each patient and provide complete and partial dentures, relines and repairs. These Denturists love going out to these unique and captivating communities regularly and despite the obvious sacrifice, find it "personally rewarding and satisfying" to serve in this capacity (Denturism Canada – Autumn 2014).

Amy Varshock is rewarded when she sees her benevolence towards her patients change lives. One patient just came out of jail and expressed a desire to start a new life. However; she was edentulous. Amy felt her sincerity and agreed to make her dentures at affordable \$50 @ month instalments. Receiving her

new smile changed her life. She came to thank Amy with a new hairdo, nicely dressed up on her way to her new job, with pictures of the reunion she had with her estranged son, who also called Amy to thank her for "giving back his Mom's confidence". Another gentleman, suffering from the results of chemotherapy; lost his hair, his teeth, too much weight, his confidence, his bank account and his smile. Despite his financial struggle and depression, he was determined to keep his 10 employees and his business from going under. His Dentist informed him that he would never be able to wear a denture. Amy agreed to make him an immediate denture, without charge, on the agreement that he returned to pay for a reline. He did and had no trouble wearing a denture. Regaining a confident smile changed his life. He became more assertive, picked up weight and his overall health improved. Moved by Amy's willingness to help, he was instrumental in setting up a benevolent plan, *Patient Pay it Forward Program*, which allows people to sponsor a patient in need, to donate to the cost of their care. To qualify as a recipient for assistance, patients agree to sponsor another patient themselves when they get "on their feet".

Bruce Anderson, a Denturist in Washington, has been known to trade a denture for an apple pie for an elderly woman on a fixed income, who desperately needed new dentures, but with an embarrassed tear admitted, there was no money for the *high cost of dentures*. Bruce serves patients referred from one of the community churches that give hand-outs to individuals in need and is rewarded when he sees someone, apparently *down on his luck*, become revived with confidence because of a new healthy smile. Bruce enjoys sharing the story of the young mom with 3 children, who had been deserted by their father. Not wanting to rely on welfare, she had neglected her own needs, providing for her children and by the time she visited Bruce's denture clinic she was edentulous. She made no eye contact and kept her head lowered, looking at the floor with her hand in front of her mouth. Finances was a major issue, but she wanted to pay. Bruce charged her a dollar. A new woman emerged the instant he seated her dentures. Her unyielding broad smile brought tears to everyone. She enrolled in College and that woman is now a school teacher. Denturists such as Bruce Anderson are selfless heroes, who strive to find the best in others (The National Denturist / Winter 2013).

Oliver Meier qualified as a Denturist in New Zealand, maintaining his clinical registration there, but in South Africa where he resides, is not allowed to do clinical work "for gain", because the profession is not yet recognised, due to the prevailing monopoly of Dentists. Despite lengthy applications, with supporting documents, to the Health Professions Council (HPCSA) his Denturist qualification and experience as clinical denture expert was disregarded together with the application to open a Register. As a result Oliver may not serve the needs of old people (with transport barriers) in retirement facilities. The State has no budget to provide dentures to the underprivileged and in this regard, has failed dismally in providing the most basic of oral health Human Rights. Oliver provides a benevolent service to many indigent patients, absorbing all the costs himself. Many of the toothless street-people of Cape Town, unable to find work due to their speech impediment and unsavoury appearance, are given a new chance in life when Oliver restores their dignity and self-esteem. He would risk getting his dental laboratory closed down by the Authorities, if he received any financial gain for these dentures. Imagine the controversy if he was to be prosecuted, being a locally unregistered clinician

(despite his tireless efforts to create a Register), for providing free services to destitute people out of compassion? If this were to happen, his friend at the New Zealand Consulate is committed to use the international diplomatic arena to ridicule the South African denture monopoly and willing to continue to provide Oliver with diplomatic neutral ground, to do clinical procedures. Oliver documents all his patient cases. He is actively involved with the initiative by the Society for CDT, to breach the monopoly and implement Denturism in South Africa ... to serve the denture needs of society!

Ish Larney is a lecturer in Clinical Dental Prosthetics at TAFE NSW in Sydney, Australia and a part-time dental practice in Bondi. His passion is to restore people's smiles, their dignity and health. Ish also provides mobile services in other communities, doing sessions at various clinics and Hospitals where he is often called on to provide palliative care to dying patients. An example in point is the late Les van Wyk (expatriate South African). After surgery, he was diagnosed to have 4 weeks to live. During the post-surgical clean-up, his dentures were accidentally discarded. All he wanted was a decent meal as he lay on his death bed, but he needed dentures. The hospital system could not provide for him, as he was above the income bracket to qualify. Dentists could not provide a clinical as well as a laboratory service, due to their lack of laboratory training. Neither was any Dentist available under short notice. The solution was that the ambulance took him to his home for a weekend. Ish rushed an emergency set of Full Upper/ Part Lower dentures over a period of two days, and Les had his meal of traditional Koeksisters, etc. He died peacefully, as was predicted. Since then, Ish had several similar calls from the hospital. Similarly, he was called to assist in a Hospice when the denture of a dying patient accidentally broke during cleaning. Ish could assist by pressing the denture together with Superglue and replaced the repaired denture in situ. The family was relieved that the patient's dignity was retained during his final hours. Ish has served several palliative care patients free of charge; all of them had less than 10 days left to live. The motivating aspect is their dignity as well as their serious concern for aesthetics, even in the dying process. Denturists have the flexibility by virtue of their training, which is unique, that endows them to provide unmatched compassionate services.

As an expatriate South African, Ish Larney also serves as a Director of Educompass School Feeding Ltd. offering financial support to supplement meals for tens of thousands of school children on the Cape Flats, providing scholarships to school children as well as providing meals to the babies of refugee families in South Africa. As a true Philanthropist, Ish is active in liaising with the Maritime Union of Australia and various Trade Unions, shipping containers filled with learning materials for needy school children in Southern Africa. He is actively committed to eradicate the mutilating Cape Flats Smile phenomenon, where Dentists removes healthy maxillary incisal teeth from teenagers in

the Cape Flats area, under the guise of culture and bling fashion. Only after they have been entrapped and become denture patients for life, do these ignorant patients realise what dentures cost, through the monopolised service. During 2014 Ish took sabbatical leave for 3 months to work at the local University of Technology in South Africa, to liaise and assist towards re-writing the curriculum of the Dental Technology program. Ish injected new energy in the local Denturism initiative, also donating his full earnings from CPUT to the Denturism fund. As a caring advocate for social justice and the cause of the underdog, Ish is a champion of the people, a symbol of compassion!



#### Reach-out Partnerships:

The profile of denture wearers is typically the elderly and underprivileged with special needs and poor socio-economic circumstances. Dentistry have become an elitist service for medical scheme driven services. Initiatives to introduce Denturism is concerned with providing equitable rehabilitation-services to the edentulous (teeth-impaired) population, which includes large numbers of the often-neglected categories of the poor and the old. Countless Welfare societies actively serving denture needs around the world, are keen to partner with Denturists to serve these vulnerable categories, in need of denture care.

As a participating provider, Shawn Murray in Oregon has provided over 100 dentures, relines and general denture care through a volunteer program in her community, called *Homeless Connect*. These patients pay according to their budget and in return hundreds of people who would otherwise have gone without dentures or follow-up care have been restored to productive members of society. Similarly, Clayton and Theresa Sulek often provide denture care at the rate low-income patients can afford. They have connected with the *Whatcom Alliance* for Healthcare Access. Australian Dental Prosthetists serve the dental needs of Aboriginals and other indigents under the banner of the *Poche Foundation* in the Australian Outback.

In Cape Town, South Africa a new multi-partnership is coming together with the Society for CDT, various donators and Dental Traders providing materials, to provide a platform for visiting Denturists from overseas, to serve the dire needs for dentures amongst the poorest of the poor. There are already some 60 expatriate South Africans qualified as Denturists. The only outstanding partner is Governmental sanction. This outreach opportunity may also provide exposure for future local Denturists. We received this enthusiastic response from Erika Coldbank in Canada; "Where-ever you get into contact with Denturists, they have compassion for denture wearers and are striving to serve their needs with a human touch of caring and clinical & technical competence too. Here in British Columbia, Denturism runs in my family. About a year ago, my aunt, cousin, sister and I were talking about how we would like to go to an underprivileged area of the world, and make dentures free of charge for the locals who normally could not afford this service".

## Conclusion:

Internationally Denturists are renowned for being selfless servants who reach out to the toothless, especially the destitute amongst them. They have compassion and sympathy for people's needs and restore the dignity of the edentulous, with care and tenderness. Denturism is not only about building dentures. It is more about building relationships! Individuals in need, given a hand-out, or receiving a denture in trade for an apple pie, have their hope restored for a better future. Given another chance and being boosted by a caring professional who makes an effort to rehabilitate their functional oral aesthetics, actually restores their human dignity; giving them back their smile. Their oral health and general health is restored; the compassion they receive restores their own self-confidence and boosts their courage for what's in store! As members of the OHT, Denturists refer needs that are beyond their scope of expertise.

Denturists are popular; patients love Denturists. Political restraints prohibiting people the opportunity to choose their services are reprehensible, because large numbers of the old and the poor have unmet oral prosthetic needs. Denturists are the only category specifically trained to only serve denture wearers. Denturists change lives; unsung heroes, that change people's lives by giving them new confidence with a *NEW SMILE*.

Every person deserves ***the ability to eat, talk and smile!*** Globally Denturism Journals often reflect on the outreach character and dedication of individual Denturists all over the world, who provide altruistic services daily. Denturists serve with compassion – they care!

All people deserve the freedom to choose a Denturist, because  
***DENTURISTS CHANGE LIVES – ONE SMILE AT A TIME!***

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**Duffy Malherbe** has over 30 years' experience in prosthetics and a passion for denture wearers' needs. He is devoted to continuous education and research, often in global dialogue. Having authored more than 30 articles and reports, submitted to various authorities and invited to publish in the SADTJ, the National Denturist Magazine, the Canadian Denturism Journal as well as the Commonwealth Association for Public Admin & Management. Duffy holds Honorary Membership of the SADLA and Wyoming State Denturist Association. He never shirked professional duty, serving at all levels of the SA Federation of Dental Technicians (forerunner to DENTASA), also as national President. He served on the national Regulator, the SADTC, also as Chair of the Committee, investigating the desirability of Denturism in South Africa. Duffy co-authored the memorandum for enactment of Denturism as a new OH category, which led to enabling legislation of 1997. He convened the launch of The Society for CDT in 1998 and continues to serve as Secretary. Duffy represent South Africa at the International Federation of Denturists and serve as Editor of the IFD Newsletter. During 2007 he posted a comprehensive website for The Society for CDT, to promote Denturism and redrafted it recently. Duffy initiated Denturism Advocators on Facebook, the only online chatroom for the profession; membership including the Movers and Shakers globally.