

IMPROVING DENTAL HEALTH IN LATVIA

One of many endeavors for Dr. Arlene Dagys

Laura Pratt

Latvia was once known as the Switzerland of the North. A little inlet tucked into the bend of Sweden's elbow, this small Baltic country is characterized by rolling hills, hundreds of lakes and beautiful coastlines. Riga is the capital city, with close to one million people living along the southernmost dip of the Gulf of Riga, which feeds from the Baltic Sea. As a city with an open port, Riga captured the interest of the Russians. Before 1940, when Latvia was an independent country, tremendous rebuilding took place. After 1941, when the Communists took it over, everything was left to fall into a state of disrepair. Old buildings and leaking pipes are the rule. Torn curtains hang in the windows. The streets are still made of ancient cobblestone. Although Latvia gained back its independence, a blanket seemed to have dropped over the whole country, discouraging progress of any kind.

It was a curious place for Toronto orthodontist and Ontario Dental Association member Dr. Arlene Dagys to show up for two weeks with a bag of dental equipment over her arm. Dr. Dagys, who specializes in treating patients with facial birth defects, visited Latvia as part of an ongoing effort, overseen by three alumni from University of Toronto's Faculty of Dentistry, to



Dr. Arlene Dagys (left) reassures the mother of a newborn with a severe bilateral cleft lip and palate. Behind them is Latvian orthodontist Dr. Inese Maulina.

improve the condition of dental health of people living in the Baltic States. The team of two dentists and a hygienist has made several trips to date, lecturing and providing clinical demonstrations in order to bring Latvia's dental health back to acceptable standards. There, Latvian dentists (or stomatologists, as they are known in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union) struggle with outdated, malfunctioning equipment in a society which only recently has come to realize that fluoride is not a poison and can be used in dentistry.

Karina Mierins, the project organizer and a dental hygienist, invited Dr. Dagys along partly because of her Lithuanian heritage.

"She has very high standards in her clinical work," Mierins said. "And I thought she related

well with the orthodontists who were there. She took a more casual approach to giving lectures, rather than formal. I think that made people more comfortable. She was approachable and they appreciated her coming to share her knowledge and, with what they had to work with, 30 or 40 years behind here, trying to help."

Dr. Dagys was one of several specialists who periodically arrive from Toronto to lecture and provide clinical demonstrations to the dental staff of the Latvian Medical Academy in Riga. She and her colleagues paid

their own way for the trip—about \$1,400 per person. They stayed at the Health Centre Jaundubulti, in a little town on the Jurmala shore of the Baltic Sea, half an hour west of Riga, from which they were shepherded for safety's sake. Their accommodations were a once-grand but now dilapidated sanatorium, where Russian government officials used to go for restful mini-vacations. She stayed in her own little apartment, with a bed, a television set that didn't work, and a little balcony that overlooked a garden.

Everyday, the Canadian dental contingent would tumble into a jeep for the ride into Riga, passing native Latvians in four-hour-long food line-ups.

At night, the team would often attend parties at the homes of locals who wished to thank them. One night they had a giant eel barbecue. On another, they toured the nightclubs of Estonia. On one of the last nights, Dr. Dagys' colleagues recall, she passed out some bubblegum among the guests of a gathering. The Latvians were entirely unfamiliar with the substance and collapsed in great gales of laughter at the bubble blowing that ensued.

The state of things over there, Dr. Dagys recalls, was, from a dental standpoint, "pretty sad." Standard infection control practices, such as using a new pair of gloves for every patient, are luxuries many Latvian dentists cannot afford.

Because the water is polluted from the Occidental Petroleum filtration plant along a coast which has never been monitored by pollution control mechanisms, it is undrinkable. That meant waterless high-speed drilling, which would burn the tooth. And the quality of their dental plaster and stone was brittle and porous. Dr. Dagys also quickly discovered that there are no diapers in Riga. Babies, handed to her wrapped in a towel, would invariably dampen the dentist. "I'd be doing laundry every day," she remembers. "I kept thinking, if I can't brush my teeth in this water, what will it do to my clothes?" When Dr. Dagys opened her supply bag of masks, gloves, needles, bone plates, screws, impression materials and impression trays, the Latvian orthodontists all began to cry.



The Latvian orthodontic staff presenting Dr. Dagys with a farewell gift — a traditional Baltic amber necklace.

money to buy the supplies, what's the point?"

As for the state of oral health she witnessed there, Dr. Dagys says she was particularly surprised to see orthodontic appliances on children whose mouths were filled with cavities. A crucial step in dental infection prevention, it seems, had been overlooked. "Parents and grandparents there feed children candy nonstop," she says. "One of the biggest rations Latvians get is sugar and children are looked upon as precious objects." Unfortunately toothbrushes and toothpaste weren't accorded the same respect.

Dr. Dagys was also unpleasantly surprised to experience the disrespect with which cleft lip and palate orthodontists were regarded by their Latvian colleagues. "They didn't treat them as equals. Cleft lip and palate orthodontists were looked at as inferior because they were working on less than ideal people. In fact, such dental procedures are often much more complicated."

Dr. Dagys should know. Orthodontics is a specialty to which she has wholeheartedly dedicated her life. That is not to say she never considered doing anything else. Before dentistry, she had to overcome the lure of teaching physical education. But after all those afternoons spent behind the scenes in her uncle's Toronto dental office, her career choice came into clear focus. And the four years she'd spent in fascinated sympathy of the mechanics of her friend's braces in high school suddenly made sense.

In 1974, Dr. Dagys graduated with honours from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Dentistry. Three years later, she emerged with a diploma in orthodontics. The first thing that sold her on orthodontics was attending a class given by Dr. Jack Dale in first-year dental school and hear-



Dr. Dagys served on the ODA Board of Governors for six years.

their material was all inferior," she says, "but their techniques were quite good." "Because the dentists did everything they could about what is going on in their profession in other, less stressed parts of the world. But the knowledge did them little practical good.

It's easy to read some things," she said, "but if you can't practise and you don't have the knowledge, what's the point?" "I witnessed there. I was very surprised to see children whose mouths were a step in dental infection, which had been overlooked. I had seen feed children candy and the worst rations Latvians had had upon as precious things and toothpaste

I was surprised to experience a cleft lip and palate for Latvian colleagues. "A cleft lip and palate is inferior because they are people. In fact, such things are more complicated." "Orthodontics is a specialty that she dedicated her life to. I never considered doing anything to overcome the lure of money after all those after-noon uncle's Toronto come into clear focus. I was fascinated sympathy races in high school

In 1974, Dr. Dagys graduated with honours from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Dentistry. Three years later she emerged with a diploma in orthodontics. The first thing that sold her on orthodontics was a class given by Dr. Jack Dale in first-year dental school and hear-

ing his enthusiasm for the field. Later, while practising with Dr. R. Bruce Ross, then chief of dentistry and orthodontics at the Hospital for Sick Children, and Dr. David Engel, a staff orthodontist, during her first-year internship, she made up her mind to abandon another passion that had temporarily detained her — prosthodontic treatment. "With prosthetics, you're trying to take teeth that are in the wrong spot and, with dentures and crowns, put them in the right position. Instead of trying to treat problems with artificial means, I wanted to do it by more natural means." Thus, an orthodontist was born.

Today, Dr. Dagys divides her time between a private practice in orthodontics in Toronto's Beaches area, and a position as a staff orthodontist at the Hospital for Sick Children's Craniofacial Treatment and Research Centre. She also finds time to serve on the executive of about a dozen dental associations, including the Ontario Association of Dental Specialists, where she is president; the Canadian Association of Orthodontists, where she is secretary-treasurer; and the American Cleft Palate/Craniofacial Association, where she sits on the executive council. She has been active in her local component society. For six years, Dr. Dagys represented Toronto East on the ODA Board of Governors. She currently sits on the ODA's Annual Spring Meeting Committee.

Dr. George Sandor, a Toronto oral and plastic surgeon, also went to Latvia with Dr. Dagys group. "I remember probably the most touching thing I saw while I was there was when I went down to the clinic one day and Arlene was demonstrating how to tape the upper lip and feed newborns [born with cleft lips and palates]. It was a very touching scene." He says the Latvian doctors were unfamiliar with this procedure and that she performed it with such precision and care, it took his breath away. "It was at that moment that there was this change that probably made the whole trip worthwhile. She left an indelible mark on these people with a very simple demonstration."

Dr. Dagys, who shares a cramped office with several orthodontists in the basement of Sick Children's Hospital, has never regretted her career choice. "Orthodontics is a great profession. It's very rewarding. The results of your treatment are very visual. They can be appreciated by everyone. When you do a perfect filling or a margin on the back of a bridge, you have your own satisfaction, and possibly your patient's. But [here], you have a great improvement in people's teeth, bite, smile and overall appearance. There's great personal satisfaction [in that]."

Her practice doesn't leave a lot of time for travel, but Dr. Dagys says that should the opportunity to visit Latvia and share her knowledge with the orthodontic professionals there ever come up again, she wouldn't hesitate. Next time, though, she'd bring over a box of diapers. ♦

Laura Pratt is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

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