Debate about dental colleges in India heats up

NEW DELHI, India: In a letter to the state government of Maharashtra, the President of the Dental Council of India, Dr Dihyendu Mazumder, has recently asked the chief minister of the state to retract permission for a new dental college to be established at the Maharashtra University of Health Sciences. He warned that with increasing output of graduates from dental schools, there will be fewer and fewer patients to provide sufficient employment for dentists.

In Maharashtra, which currently has over 55 educational institutes for dentistry, Mazumder said that the dentist to patient ratio has fallen lately to under 1:5,000, a number lower than recommended by the World Health Organization. In addition, the state recently increased the number of positions available in its three state-run dental colleges with the goal to provide more security for dentists and a better income, for example, in the business process outsourcing or insurance sector.

With this trend continuing, Mazumder said that more and more dentists throughout the country are at risk of becoming jobless and pursuing other professions that offer more security and a better income, for example, in the business process outsourcing or insurance sector.

The problem of having too many dentists is not only limited to India’s third largest state. In August, the government of New Delhi, for example, announced plans to expand the Maulana Azad Institute of Dental Sciences into a full university.

Back in February, the Kerala chapter of the Indian Dental Association also ran a campaign against the opening of new colleges in their state, which already has 20 dental institutions and a ratio even lower than that in Maharashtra.

Nationwide, dental colleges have mushroomed over the last few years, now adding 30,000 new dentists to an already massive dental workforce of 1.3 million, according to the Dental Council of India.

The organisation has sought to halt the trend by introducing regulations to make it more difficult, particularly for private entities, to open new colleges. For the next academic year, therefore, new institutes will only receive permission if associated with a nearby medical college. From 2015, all dental colleges will also have to be certified by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council in Bangalore, a governmental body for quality assurance in higher education.

However, experts say that these steps may already be too late and that there is time for a revised national strategy on dental education.