

## THE MOST TOOTHLESS SMILE IN EUROPE

Portugal has the most toothless smile in Europe! How? Why?

First of all, the problem is cultural and educational. There has never been any program on dental education in Portugal. For Example, "Between a top model cell phone and a healthy smile, people prefer the first one!" Even public figures, with no financial problems, appear on TV with smiles full of "holes", because most people think that oral health is not a priority!

Secondly, our public health system doesn't include any dental care. The oral health of the Portuguese depends solely on the private sector. Not surprisingly, lots of people never go to the dentist until it is too late, when pain is not bearable anymore! Thirdly, the situation is even more serious when we consider that millions of Portuguese do not have access to dental care due to lack of buying power (a visit costs between 30 and 75 euros). The problem gets worse among the old, with one half of senior citizens in Portugal not having one tooth in their mouth! The pensions are so low that they can't cover the high expenses of dentistry. The lack of teeth results in problems of a psychological nature, such as isolation and shame. All in all, not a pretty picture.

The problem, though, is not a shortage of dentists. In a region where almost no dentists existed twenty years ago, there are now enough to attend the population. All of them are private and not cheap. The seven Portuguese dental schools

(three public and four private) now turn out about five hundred graduates in Dental Medicine. In a few years, the growth in the area will be out of control and this will bring serious problems.

The government also allows non-qualified dentists to operate legally. In a controversial decision the National Assembly passed a law legalizing all the dentists without certification, to carry on with their practice, with the dubious obligation to do a certain number of courses in a determined number of years. No one thinks that these so called dentists will ever do any courses. Many of them are semi-illiterate and some are too old to set foot in a classroom. Not surprisingly, the population with lower financial means prefers these "dentists" because they are cheaper.

Recently, the Assembly of the Republic approved a law that will make it possible to combat the shameless situation that is taking place in Portuguese dentistry, where hundreds of individuals practise with no academic training whatsoever.

Special recognition was given to these "professionals" in order to preserve acquired rights. Hundreds of candidates were left out, but in spite of this, they continued practicing dentistry. The European Commission has instituted a lawsuit against Portugal in the Justice Court of the European Communities, because it considers that the legislation regulating the profession of dentist vio-

lates the community directives on Dental Medicine. For the Commission, which is acting after a complaint from the order, the profession of "Odontologista", as it is defined in Portuguese legislation, has a "field of activity almost identical" to that of the graduates of the schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine. Odontology appears as an "alternative and competing" profession with that of dentist, when its professionals do not have the qualifications foreseen in European directives.

It is thus that the smile of the Portuguese goes!



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