An Interview with Professor Yasumasa Akagawa

The International College of Prosthodontists (ICP) offers its members exceptional biennial meetings in carefully selected locations that reflect the College's global educational commitment. The 1991 Hiroshima meeting was a very memorable one and provided many of us with the unique opportunity to enjoy Japan and make friends with numerous Japanese colleagues whose career trajectories have profoundly impacted scholarship in the discipline. Professor Akagawa's recognized leadership and scholarship eventually led to his ICP co-presidency with Dr Patrick Lloyd, and recently culminated in the retirement from his long-term tenure as Professor and Chairman at Hiroshima University. I invited two of his long-term friends and associates, Professors Kiyoshi Koyano and Yoshinobu Maeda, to undertake this interview assignment for our international readership. Both gentlemen have already served our ICP and this journal with distinction; and Dr Koyano shared the ICP presidency with Dr Regina Mericske-Stern from 2005 to 2007, while Dr Maeda is currently sharing his ICP presidency with Dr Martin Gross. All of us who have enjoyed a warm friendship with Yasumasa Akagawa wish him and his wife much happiness and serenity for many years ahead.

—George A. Zarb, Editor-in-Chief

What is your current position and role in prosthodontic education?

I have recently retired from Hiroshima University and am now a professor emeritus at that institution. Prior to my retirement, I was chair of the Department of Advanced Prosthodontics, where the fields of removable prosthodontics, implant prosthodontics, and fixed prosthodontics are integrated exclusively in a public dental school in Japan. I have been responsible for the last 20 years for both undergraduate and postgraduate education in prosthodontics as well as geriatric patient care. I am proud of having educated 75 postgraduate students in the department over the last 20 years of my professorship. After retirement, I was appointed president of Ohu University, which includes schools of dentistry and pharmacy. As president, I am performing university management; however, I am still involved in undergraduate and postgraduate education as a professor of prosthodontics.

How did you get there?

My academic career started in 1979 when I was appointed research/clinical fellow in the Department of Removable Prosthodontics at Hiroshima University School of Dentistry after completion of an undergraduate course in dentistry and a postgraduate

course in prosthodontics at the same university. I was directly and personally influenced by my mentor and immediate predecessor, Dr Hiromichi Tsuru, chair of the Department of Removable Prosthodontics during my undergraduate and postgraduate years. In 1993, I was appointed professor and chair of the Department of Removable Prosthodontics at Hiroshima University School of Dentistry after working as assistant professor and associate professor of prosthodontics. Because I was born in and received my primary, secondary, and higher education in Hiroshima, I am a native Hiroshiman, which has brought both an advantage and disadvantage to my academic career path.

Where and when did it all start—influences, catalyzing events, etc?

My postgraduate student life started in 1974 in Hiroshima. My specific interest was implants because both Japanese ceramic implants and American bladevent implants were receiving much attention at that time. However, for some reason, I was not allowed to perform implant research, and, consequently, I decided for my PhD to do histologic and histochemical analyses in 350 rats to evaluate masticatory muscle changes associated with increased occlusal vertical dimension. The fact that these results were published in the *Archives of Oral Biology* and the *Journal of Prosthetic Dentistry* influenced my fascination with biologically based prosthodontics and implants. After manually searching the literature (unfortunately no PubMed was available at that time), I realized that bone-anchored implants had been studied in Gothenburg, Sweden, for more than 10 years. These scientifically proven clinical outcomes led to my decision to visit Gothenburg University to learn more about this type of implants. I remained for 1 year between 1981 and 1982 as a visiting research fellow at the Department of Prosthetic Dentistry of the Faculty of Odontology. Dr Bjorn Hedegard, head of the department, introduced Dr Yataoro Komiyama (who stayed there prior to my visit) and myself to Professors Per-Ingvar Brånemark, Thomas Albrektsson, and G. E. Carlsson. The osseointegrated implant was described in a book published in Sweden entitled *Osseointegrated Implants in the Treatment of the Edentulous Jaw: Experience from a 10-year Period*. While I could not find the book in Japan (no Amazon website was available at that time), I acquired the book in Gothenburg and read through it several times. My main impression regarding osseointegrated implants in the dental hospital was that the implants were not at all mobile and that implant placement required careful technique to minimize tissue trauma. This further motivated me to continue my investigations and to consider different research ideas and approaches.

When I returned to Hiroshima with expanded knowledge and skills in osseointegrated implants, I started several research projects on implants and was very fortunate to receive supporting research grants each year.

In 1984, the Quintessence Publishing Company in Tokyo organized a symposium on ceramic implants and Professor Brånemark was invited. Professor Tsuru, my boss, recommended me as a lecturer, and my lecture on ceramic implants was well received by the audience. This boosted my confidence to continue my academic career at the University instead of taking over my father's job at his dental office in Hiroshima.

What were the influences that led to your career decision?

Besides the positive response to my lecture, another major influence was the experience of hosting the World Congress on Prosthodontics in conjunction with the 4th Meeting of the International College of Prosthodontists in Hiroshima in 1991. This meeting was the first international meeting organized by the Japan Prosthodontic Society. My mentor, Professor Tsuru, was the chair of the organizing committee and I served as secretary of this major congress. For more than 2 years, I communicated with not only Japanese but also overseas colleagues. The great success of this congress officially placed Japanese colleagues on par with their overseas counterparts. Furthermore, this success gave me a great opportunity to meet Drs Harold Preiskel, Peter Schaerer, George Zarb, and Kenneth Adisman—the unparalleled leaders in prosthodontics. I believe that this experience was the starting point for my involvement in the international prosthodontic community, particularly the International College of Prosthodontists.

What has made you happiest in your career? Any disappointments and regrets?

I can honestly say that, while there have been inevitable ups and downs in my academic life, I have been fortunate to follow this career path together with my colleagues. My department colleagues and postgraduate students have enriched my professional career and taught me a lot of things—the road has been exciting and stimulating although not always smooth. When I started my chairmanship in 1993, I set the goal for our department to become a world-class prothodontic department. This year I

was truly honored to receive the Golden Medallion Award of the American Prosthodontic Society and the International Association for Dental Research (IADR) Distinguished Scientist Award in Prosthodontics and Implants, which suggests that we have achieved that goal. These premier scientific awards definitely belong to my departmental colleagues who worked with me for more than 20 years, and the awards I received this February in Chicago and in March in Seattle were the greatest honor in my career just prior to retirement.

On the other hand, there have been some disappointments and regrets. Firstly, regarding prosthodontic education, the prosthodontic community does not sufficiently recognize the importance of biologically based techniques, and I could not fully convince them otherwise. Prosthodontic education should not be such heavily skills-oriented education. Secondly, the community does not fully recognize the goal of prosthodontic treatment, although we face an ultra-aged society. The goal must be to extend healthy life expectancy for the independent elderly and to enhance quality of life for the dependent elderly through the recovery or improvement of oral functions and esthetics through the delivery of prostheses. There are very few studies clarifying the impact of prosthodontic treatment on general health. Therefore, further well-designed studies should be performed, and the obtained results should increase the value of prosthodontics with regard to preventive strategies for healthy aging. We have performed a limited number of studies but definitely not enough.

Your thoughts about different approaches to a graduate education (eg, the paper-heavy European route or the strongly clinical, technical North American one).

Both approaches can lead to the expected goal in education. The most important point is to fully understand the cycle and mechanism of research. The sequence of research is to choose the research problem, design a provisional protocol, perform the research (revise the protocol), analyze the results, and apply the results clinically. This is very beneficial for fostering critical thinking skills and to encourage the importance of research-based information.

Any advice to a young colleague who is agonizing over the career paths—academic vs practice?

Young colleagues who wish to follow an academic career must possess critical thinking skills through understanding the mechanism and sequence of research. Whether they choose the academic route or practice, I believe that exerting all possible efforts with sincerity is the most important thing. They also need to recognize the importance of biologically based prosthodontics and evidence-based clinical decision-making. In addition, they also need to appreciate the impact of prosthodontic treatment on general health, which may contribute to the extension of healthy life expectancy. If we as professionals and our patients really share and understand the goal of prosthodontic treatment, I am confident that we will have a brilliant future in prosthodontics.

Where do you go from here?

I have just started a new job as president of Ohu University in Fukushima, which means being involved in the overall management of the university. However, I still remain involved in educational commitments with research-based teaching among the students. In this regard, I would like to continue some research activities with my former and present colleagues who have worked with me over the years and are working in Hiroshima and Kooriyama, Fukushima.

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