



First Japanese dentists in Mexico and their influence upon development of dentistry

Los primeros dentistas japoneses en México y su influencia en el desarrollo de la Odontología

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INTRODUCTION

During the years 1950-1980 a great percentage of young subjects, descendant of Japanese in Mexico and called Mexican Nikkei¹ exhibited predilection for some university careers, among which we can highlight Dentistry above others. This is due to the fact that in most cases a family friend or family member had been devoted to this profession. This might have been due to a series of historical events which had been taking place in previous years between Mexico and Japan. Technological exchange was enhanced, which brought about the development of some parts of health areas which favored wide sections of Mexican population, and later, in the life of Japanese subjects who had migrated to Mexico, this trend was later observed in the development of Japanese-ascent Mexicans.

The purpose of this essay is to show historical circumstances which favored this exchange, and to partly show events taking place in the development of the Japanese community in Mexico with the arrival of qualified Japanese subjects. Five health areas received benefitted from this exchange (physicians, pharmacists, dentists, accoucheurs and midwives and veterinarian. In the present article we will mainly focus in observing events specially related to Dentistry.

The term *nikkei* encompasses many and diverse meanings depending on situation, location and environment. *Nikkei* also encompasses subjects of mixed ethnic ascendance, who are also called *nikkei*. Japan natives also use the term *nikkei* to describe emigrants and their descendants who later returned to Japan. Many of these *Nikkei* live in close communities and preserve identities which are separate from that of native Japanese.

HISTORY OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MEXICO AND JAPAN

Relationship between Mexico and Japan began in 1609, when a Mexican ship travelling from the Philippines suffered an accident in the beaches of Onyuku, in the district of Chiba,² the ship suffered an accident, and thanks to the population of that small village 317 Mexicans were rescued.

JAPANESE MIGRATION TO MEXICO

From late XIX century onwards, migration and colonization politics of president Porfirio Dia's government awoke interest in Japan to send migrants to Mexico, thus, on May 10th 1897, the first Japanese immigrants arrived in Mexico to work in a coffee plantation in the State of Chiapas.³

BEGINNINGS OF DENTISTRY IN MEXICO

Dental care in Mexico had been taking place, performed by phlebotomians and barbers who arrived in Mexico along with the Spanish conquerors.⁴ In 1799, by ordnance of the Viceroy of Azanza, it was

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established that with respect to the work undertaken by tooth-pulling phlebotomian barbers they had to pass a test if they desired to continue performing phlebotomies and dental extractions, those who did not succeed in passing, would have to limit their practice to only barbering endeavors.

DENTISTRY IN JAPAN AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

It is considered that dentistry formally began in Japan with Dr Kisey Takayama, considered the «father of American dentistry in Japan»;⁵ born in Okayama, he was a samurai who, in the 5th year of the Meiji era (1872 AC) moved to San Francisco, California, USA looking for fortune. There he met a dentist, Dr Van Denburgh, with whom he learned basic aspects of this profession which led to his later obtaining a license to practice of dentistry.

QUALIFIED JAPANESE SUBJECTS WHO ENTERED MEXICO UNDER THE FREE PROFESSION TREATY

In these historical circumstances 33 Japanese professionals entered Mexico in years 1911-1928.³ According to records of Mexican naturalization processes, found in the archives of the Foreign Relations Ministry, most of the registered professionals were dentists (16), followed by physicians (15), veterinarians (1) and pharmacist (1).

The aforementioned Japanese professionals who entered the country in that time span, according to classification established by Professor Ota, corresponded to the fifth type of Japanese immigrant. It is worth mentioning that only one of the 16 dentists decided to take roots in Mexico City, the remaining dentists decided to settle outside of the big cities. This was probably due to two causes, first, the lack of health professionals within the Mexican Republic and second lack of medical competence existing in these places; for these reasons, and in a relatively short time, many of them reached success and the recognition of the Mexican population.

Many of them adapted to Mexican customs and ways of life, nevertheless, from a professional perspective, most of them had to return to Japan after experiencing problems with Spanish language. Many Japanese dentists were inclined to hire as assistants *issei* countrymen (first generation Japanese in Mexico) who were already established in the country. For many Japanese subjects living in Mexico this represented a

unique opportunity to improve not only their financial circumstances, but to additionally acquire social recognition from the Mexican population. On the one side, financial investment was not high, and the risk of damaging the patient was, from their point of view, lesser when compared to other professions such as medicine. This first generation of Japanese subjects received transmission of knowledge, and they in turn performed two tasks: on the one hand they worked as assistants and translators for their teachers, and on the other, they later became practical dentists. It is also considered that many of the disciples of these first Japanese dentists, since they mastered Spanish language and were better acquainted with Mexican customs, upon their independence after being apprentices for a few years, they outscored their teachers and acquired greater numbers of patients.

Reputation of Japanese dentists was immediate, they were always characterized by fair, and mostly honest professional work, thus many of the practical dentists could avail themselves to this situation and become dental professionals based on the strength of knowledge acquired from their teachers. Many of them achieved a very positive task as professionals at the service of Mexican population, achieving recognition of the Mexican society. Nevertheless, the fact that they were practicing dentists who had not formally studied a dental career and since they lacked a university degree to support their activities, drove the Mexican government to rescind the agreement, which was no longer valid as of May 20, 1928, since, according to them, it did not guarantee «exercise the free profession of physicians to subjects, who had informed were not trained for it».³

On the other hand, the Mexican government in an effort to control dental practice, established regularization programs, which consisted on granting a special permit to practical dentists, who having been practicing dentistry for over 10 consecutive years could then obtain an official permit as long as they took evaluation courses in accredited centers. Many of them availed themselves to these institutes to take courses in professional groups such as RaDaAr. Later, some of them, and at great sacrifice since they did not master the language, prepared themselves and successfully completed the University Dental Degree which at that time was only offered in the facilities of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

In spite of these government-imposed restrictions, the number of dentists considerably increased when compared to other professions. For example the directory of the Japanese community published in 1955

showed a much greater number of advertisements for dentists among other classified professions.

We present the case of Dr Kanshi Atsumi as an example of the influence exerted by Japanese dentists who first arrived in Mexico up to our days, especially in the Japanese community in Mexico City.

Interest in studying the career of D.D.s in the Japanese community has prevailed over time, one example of this would be the case of Dr Kosuke Ohara.

Many of the original Japanese professionals finally decided to return to Japan, only a few remained in Mexico. Nevertheless, the seed sown in their Japanese apprentices represented the first step for them to be able to exercise the profession of dentist in Mexico.

CONCLUSIONS

Mexico was the first country which signed a commerce treaty in equality terms with Japan. It was also the first Latin American country to receive Japanese immigration, and was the only country to sign with Japan a treaty for the free exercise of the profession, which was in force from 1917 to 1928.

Even though it was for a short time and only a small number of professionals availed themselves to the opportunity to exercise their profession in Mexico, their contribution to health improvement in Mexican population was highly appreciated, since their knowledge and labor were spread out and continued by other Japanese subjects who had previously decided to establish themselves in Mexico. Most of them enjoyed improved life circumstances, with a new way to live that perhaps they had not envisaged before; they had access to social and financial levels better recognized by Mexican society, allowing thus for their descendants to enjoy better professional opportunities in Mexico.

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