

Interview with Dr Helfried Bieber, Flottenarzt a.D. (Chief Dental Officer [ret.])

Dentistry is dentistry—inside or outside the Armed Forces

Dr Helfried Bieber, chief dentist of the German Armed Forces, has retired from the armed forces after an extensive career in the military. He had maintained intensive contacts with German dental organizations, a career crowned in 2019 by his leadership of the Section of Defence Forces Dental Services (SDFDS). The FDI General Assembly in Geneva in September was among his last official acts. In this interview, Germany's top military dentist speaks about his tasks, achievements and goals.

What were your official positions in the professional sphere during the time of your active service?

As Chief Dental Officer of the German Armed Forces with the rank of Captain, I was the first German Chair of the SDFDS, the military dental section of the FDI World Dental Federation. The FDI is made up of more than 195 member associations from 130 countries. Given the high level of international confidence and recognition of the performance of dentistry in the German Armed Forces, which we also enjoy in the field everywhere in the world, you can imagine what an honour this has been for the Medical Service for one of their own to be delegated to serve in this interesting and important role.



For me, cooperation at eye level and “learning from equals” have always been in focus. That is why we have continued to expand and intensify our cooperation with the civilian health-care system in recent years. In the meantime, this has resulted in excellent collaboration between the Department of Dentistry within the German Armed Forces and the various professional bodies, organisations and scientific societies—including the German Dental Association (BZÄK) and the various State Chambers of Dentists, the German Federal Association of Contract Dentists (KZBV) and its state-level equivalents, the German Society of Dentistry and Oral Medicine (DGZMK) and its scientific arms, but also other professional organisations, universities and the dental industry.

Medical officers have served on numerous BZÄK committees relevant to the armed forces for many years, including international affairs, radiology, practice management, digital technology, education and infection control.

Personally, I was able to contribute the views and interests of the Armed Forces Medical Service through regular invitations extended by the Board of the BZÄK—which has proved especially useful in a time of pandemic. I am very grateful for this practical cooperation.

The Department of Dentistry within the German Armed Forces has created a well-developed network with its partners in the international arena—including but not limited to NATO. In addition, regular exchanges take place that include mutual invitations to participate in events and symposia.

What were your most important goals? Have you achieved them?

Caring for the oral health of soldiers in action is important to me. This is a challenge for us as dentists in the military. We not only represent the dental profession there, but we also have the obligation to ensure dental health and to offer and carry out any necessary treatment under sometimes difficult conditions.

I had sought to improve by pooling and evaluating the experiences of other nations for the benefit of the soldiers whose lives and well-being are entrusted to us.

The special conditions in the field, such as stress, climate challenges, accommodation needs also encourage new ways of thinking. For example, we carry out military medical research projects on the prevention of mission-related deterioration in soldiers' oral health. Or just think of the special living conditions in shared accommodations. Anti-snoring therapy, for example, is also important not least for sociohygienic reasons.

There have also been significant changes in the area of intramission care with regard to mobility.

I worked to see dentistry perceived as an integrated part of general medicine in the armed forces as in civilian life. Part of this was that we gave dentistry more of a preventive orientation within the armed forces, well ahead of the introduction of the new services for the treatment of periodontitis in the civilian sector, for example. And of course, dentistry is dentistry—inside or outside the German Armed Forces

What are your wishes for dentists in the German Armed Forces in the future?

Oral health all over the world is not really our purview; we have neither the strength nor the means to accomplish that. As

elsewhere throughout large parts of NATO, a dental risk qualification system, the so-called Dental Fitness Class, has been practised very successfully in the armed forces for many years. It has been important to me to discuss this targeted approach with other military colleagues around the world. Every soldier should be aware of the general observation that "health starts in the mouth"!

I would like to see dentistry in the German Armed Forces to master the challenges ahead and for professional satisfaction to increase further through comradely and collegial interaction using up-to-date infrastructure and materials and infrastructure—particularly IT infrastructure. The satisfaction of the army personnel to be cared for is also eminently important. I confidently hope that we as military dentists will remain integrated into the civilian dental community. The same rule applies as in the civilian community: Together we will be strong!

Thank you for this interesting interview—and all the best wishes for your future endeavours.

Interview by: Editor-in-Chief Anita Wuttke

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