Becoming one of the top five manufacturers of dental materials in the world

An interview with Mitsui Chemicals Executive Vice-President Minoru Koshibe in Japan

In a surprising move, German precious metals group Heraeus sold its dental business to Mitsui Chemicals in April. Recently, Dental Tribune Japan had the opportunity to visit the company’s headquarters in Tokyo and sit down with Executive Vice-President Minoru Koshibe to talk about the reasons for the acquisition and the reasons his company, which specialises in chemicals and plastics manufacturing, sees its future in the dental field.

Dental Tribune Japan: Mr Koshibe, economic growth in Japan has been slow in recent years. Was this one of the major reasons for the Heraeus acquisition?

Koshibe: As a diversified chemicals company, 70 per cent of our business comes from the manufacturing of chemicals, including petrochemicals. For this reason, we are naturally affected by macroeconomic changes like rising oil prices. After the Lehman brothers bankruptcy and the harsh economic conditions that followed, we no longer perceived a future of growth and continuity, so we decided to move our corporate direction to areas that would be less affected by economic cycles, such as health care.

Although we originally operated in the medical field, we were not able to advance immediately in that business because we sold this segment very early on. However, we subsequently started to develop monomer optical lenses, which gained a huge market share in Japan. With Sun Medical as our next business endeavour, we planned to expand operations to a worldwide level. Unfortunately, we soon realised that this would probably take 20 to 30 years, so we finally decided to take the plunge and acquire a company with a global foothold in the dental materials market.

Had you been looking into other companies, and what factor made you decide on Heraeus over all available options?

We made a list of the top ten manufacturers of dental materials in the world and narrowed it down to a few companies after having reviewed them from various perspectives. For our envisioned global expansion, Heraeus seemed to be the best choice, also because the company was constantly trying to expand its reach into dental CAD/CAM, which is a new business segment, for which extraordinary growth in the future is anticipated. Had Heraeus not had such a digital services division, I guess we would have had to acquire another company, but the company’s existing foothold in the CAD/CAM business was a decisive factor. Therefore, it was also the first company we contacted.

“Despite the difficult market environment, we still want to expand our sales channels in Europe and North America.”

Herene has significant market share in the European and North American dental markets. Do you intend to increase your reach there in particular?

With the bonding agent Super-Bond as key product, we have been operating through Sun Medical in North America and Europe already, but sales there has not met our expectations in the past. Despite the difficult market environment, we still want to expand our sales channels in Europe and North America, as these are the most important markets for materials with higher price points.

In order to achieve this, we aim to integrate our technologies with Heraeus Kulzer’s sales channels. Dental materials have shifted to composite resins and hybrid new materials that meet various aesthetic requirements, and we intend to create a synergy in making the best possible use of our polymer technologies for the new digital services. Methyl methacrylate is certainly the gold standard at the moment, but we want to develop dental materials with new polymers. We believe the key technology for achieving this will be CAD/CAM and 3-D printing.

What outcomes do you expect from the acquisition for your domestic dental business?

We want dental materials to become the core of our overall business. Since Sun Medical is much smaller than Heraeus, we decided to establish our dental materials head office in Germany, which started operations in April. From there, Sun Medical...
Ultradent highlights products for restorative dentistry

Ultradent’s original knitted cord Ultrapak was developed for providing rapid tissue displacement, detailed margins, and quality impressions. It compresses upon packing and then expands for optimal retraction. Through its knitted structure, it remains in place better than any twisted or braided cord, according to the company. Ultrapak CleanCut has a high carbon-steel blade in the cap for ultimate convenience, while the dispensing orifice prevents the cord from falling back into the bottle upon cutting. For easy measurement of the cord length, it has a ruler printed on the label.

The company also offers a glycol-based caries indicator called Sable Seek that stains carious dentine even in difficult-to-see places, such as under overhanging enamel of Class I, II, or III preparations, dark green. Through the removal of this non-mineral dentine, the bond strength of the entire restoration can be improved significantly. Precise and mess-free delivery is provided through a syringe delivery system.

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia/SOUTH JORDAN, USA: Since 2007, US dental equipment manufacturer Ultradent has offered the only three-in-one drill on the market with its Uni-Core Post and Drill System. By matching the characteristics of dentine, the posts of the system, made of pre-stressed fibres that run the entire length, are supposed to help minimise the likelihood of root fracture. In addition, they result in more natural, aesthetic restorations, according to the company. In combination with a durable drill, they can be used for up to 15 procedures, such as the removal of rigid obturators, gutta-percha, or composite from canals as part of a post-placement procedure.

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How will your company influence business decisions at Heraeus, and how do you evaluate the company’s position in dental markets right now?

“We want to expand the scope of dental materials through technological innovation…”

Although they have a strong presence in the North American and European markets, their market position in Asia is not very significant. On the other hand, we are a strong force in Japan and South-East Asia, and thus have more information on markets like Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. We believe that with the right marketing, the Heraeus brand can be successfully expanded in that region. Our company and Heraeus Kulzer complement each other’s strong and weak points well.

Decisions at Heraeus will be made within the management resources of the entire Mitsui Chemicals Group. Heraeus is a wholly owned subsidiary, which means investments will be under our control and implemented with consideration of the overall balance sheet. As we do have a management strategy to shift our positioning towards the health care business, people at Heraeus can expect us to make good use of our management resources and give high priority to this field when it comes to investments in the future.

You also acquired shares from DENTCA, a US denture manufacturer, recently. Are you currently looking into opportunities to acquire other dental companies?

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