

## On oral medicine's 100th anniversary: origins, expansion, and future horizons

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The year 2025 marked the centennial of Oral Medicine, a discipline that has progressively bridged dentistry and medicine, shaping patient care, health systems, education and science. The historical evolution of Oral Medicine is interlaced with the contributions of several professional generations who recognized the importance of integrating medical knowledge into dental practice. This commemorative reflection acknowledges the challenge of fully capturing the rich and complex history of Oral Medicine — its origins, growth and global impact — while seeking to highlight key milestones and future directions that continue to shape the specialty across clinical practice, education, and research.

### THE FOUNDATION OF ORAL MEDICINE (1925)

Dr. Francis P. McCarthy (1883-1970) (Figure 1), a graduate of Tufts Medical School, played a pioneering role in establishing the specialty of Oral Medicine. Initially trained in pathology and dermatology, he became particularly interested in oral mucosal diseases, introducing the first-ever Oral Medicine course at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in 1925<sup>1</sup>. This initiative marked the formal foundation of the field of Oral Medicine and laid the groundwork for a specialty dedicated to the diagnosis and management of patients with complex oral diseases or oral manifestations of systemic conditions<sup>1,2</sup>.

Beyond the classroom, Dr. McCarthy established one of the earliest Oral Medicine services, where he integrated clinical practice with didactic education. His

students, both predoctoral and postdoctoral, gained invaluable experience diagnosing and managing complex oral mucosal conditions. He emphasized a comprehensive approach to patient care, fostering an understanding of the systemic implications of oral diseases long before this became a widely approach in healthcare<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Portrait of Dr. Francis P. McCarthy (1883-1970), the pioneer of the Oral Medicine field. Courtesy of Dr. Philip L. McCarthy II, his grandson.

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## THE GLOBAL EXPANSION OF ORAL MEDICINE

While Dr. McCarthy's contributions laid the foundation in the United States, the global development of Oral Medicine was propelled by other pioneers. In the 1940s and 1950s, Dr. Samuel Charles Miller at New York University further expanded the specialty, followed by Dr. Lester Burket at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Miller's efforts led to the formation of the Academy of Dental Medicine in 1945, now named the American Academy of Oral Medicine (AAOM), marking an important step toward formalizing the discipline and drawing the road map that led to the formal specialty recognition in the United States in the year of 2020<sup>3</sup>.

In Europe and Ibero-America, Oral Medicine (or Stomatology) evolved in parallel. Institutions across the United Kingdom, Spain, and Brazil integrated medical knowledge into dental education, recognizing the necessity of interdisciplinary training<sup>4</sup>. In South America, a strong representativeness of Oral Medicine professionals existed since the 1970s yielding the establishment of professional Oral Medicine organizations in 6 of the continent's 12 countries<sup>5</sup>. Founded in 1974 as a pioneer in Latin America, the Brazilian Society of Stomatology (Oral Medicine) was renamed in 2007 as the Brazilian Society of Stomatology (Oral Medicine) and Oral Pathology (SOBEP)<sup>4</sup>. The late Professor Hector Lanfranchi made significant contributions to the specialty in Latin America, promoting the *Sacale la lengua al cáncer* campaign and training dentists to detect early stages of oral cancer<sup>6</sup>.

In the United Kingdom, the specialty began to emerge during the 1950s, driven by growing clinical and academic interest. Among the pioneers were Rod Cawson (Guy's Hospital), Brian Cooke (Cardiff) and Sir David K. Mason (Glasgow) who contributed to the early academic development of the discipline. The Nuffield Foundation's support for the first two academic Chairs in Oral Medicine, at the University of New Castle and Guy's Hospital, along with the establishment of dedicated departments and units across major universities, played a pivotal role in its formal recognition<sup>7</sup>.

The growth of the specialty in the Asian continent is marked by the establishment of academic units in several countries within the commonwealth, and also China, Israel, Indonesia and Japan<sup>5</sup>. In China, the study of oral mucosal diseases gained momentum during

the last quarter of the 20th century. The specialty was formally established toward the end of the century, marked by the founding of the Chinese Society of Oral Medicine in 1998. Currently, Oral Medicine services are centralized and primarily offered in multi-disciplinary dental hospitals<sup>8</sup>.

The African continent is wide and populous, yet underrepresented in terms of formal associations of Oral Medicine. South Africa seems to be the only country with an official representation; however, Oral Medicine is not considered a specialty of its own and its practice lies in the scope of Periodontology<sup>5</sup>. In Oceania, while Oral Medicine has been recognized as a specialty since the 1970s, the Oral Medicine Academy of Australasia was not established until 2010<sup>2,5</sup>.

Following the establishment of the AAOM, several other Oral Medicine associations emerged, each contributing to the advancement of international collaboration, the standardizing of training programs, and the promotion of research. The European Association of Oral Medicine (EAOM) was founded in 1998 led by Professors Crispian Scully (United Kingdom) and Isaac van der Waal (the Netherlands) along with Professors Sir David Mason (United Kingdom), Tony Axéll (Scandinavia), Antonio Azul (Portugal) and Stephen Challacombe (United Kingdom). The first EAOM congress was held in Amsterdam in 1998 under the chairmanship of Professor Isaac van der Waal, the first EAOM president, marked by the beginning of a structured platform for European collaboration<sup>7</sup>. Complementing these efforts, the World Workshop on Oral Medicine (WWOM), co-founded by Professors Sir David Mason and Dean Millard, held its inaugural meeting in Chicago, USA, in 1988. Among its stated missions is "promoting a global oral medicine and interprofessional educational framework", a goal that has continued to guide subsequent workshops, including the WWOM IX, held in Las Vegas, USA, in 2025<sup>3</sup>. Most recently, a global survey involving 593 Oral Medicine practitioners from 55 countries identified key barriers to research in the field and proposed solutions to foster stronger international scientific collaboration<sup>9</sup>.

The development of Oral Medicine has been supported by journals that publish research in the field and promote its visibility within the global medical and dental communities. Internationally recognized platforms include the Oral Medicine section of *Oral Surgery, Oral Medicine, Oral Pathology and Oral Radiology* (OOOO), the *Journal of Oral Pathology and Medicine*,

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the *Medicina Oral, Patología Oral y Cirugía Bucal* journal, and *Oral Diseases*. More recently, the Journal of Oral Diagnosis (JOD) has embraced the challenge of consolidating Oral Medicine in Brazil and Latin America while positioning itself as an international platform for publishing Oral Medicine and Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology research.

Today, Oral Medicine is recognized as a distinct specialty in over 30 countries, with postgraduate programs dedicated to training specialists in the field<sup>5</sup>. However, despite this progress, disparities remain in the formal recognition and standardization of Oral Medicine as a specialty, with some countries integrating it within broader dental or medical domains rather than as an independent discipline<sup>5</sup>.

### **FUTURE CHALLENGES OF ORAL MEDICINE**

Dr. McCarthy's contributions extended beyond academia through his pioneering research into conditions such as oral leukoplakia and pyostomatitis vegetans, which remain relevant today. His legacy lives on through the work of his students, including Drs. Philip L. McCarthy and Gerald Shklar, who compiled and expanded upon his teachings in the seminal text, *Diseases of the Oral Mucosa*<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the field has continued to evolve, with ongoing advancements in research, education, and clinical practice. The establishment of postgraduate programs, the integration of medical education into dental curricula, and the development of authoritative textbooks all trace their roots to the early efforts of these pioneers. Lester Burket's textbook on Oral Medicine, now in its Thirteenth Edition, became a standard reference manual used in dental schools worldwide<sup>10</sup>.

Despite this progress, challenges persist. The uneven distribution of Oral Medicine worldwide reflects significant gaps in access to specialized care and training. Some regions, particularly in Central America, the Caribbean<sup>11</sup>, and parts of Africa and Asia, lack formalized Oral Medicine training programs, specialty recognition, and professional societies, which impacts the delivery of care to a wide and unique patient population. This demands further international collaboration to support and empower the existence of Oral Medicine in those parts of the world<sup>5,11-13</sup>.

Today, a century after Dr. McCarthy's first lecture, Oral Medicine remains a popular specialty dedicated to seeing referrals from dentists, physicians and family practitioners and patients' demands for the diagnosis and management of oral manifestations of systemic

diseases, disorders of oral soft tissues or jawbones, oral cancer and oral potentially malignant disorders, salivary gland disorders and orofacial pain. As new challenges arise, such as the impact of aging populations, adverse lifestyles, immunocompromised patients, oral adverse events to new pharmacological interventions, and emerging diseases, among many others, the specialty must continue to expand, adapt, and innovate<sup>2,4</sup>.

As we look toward the future, we acknowledge that the integration of medicine and dentistry remains as crucial today as it was a century ago<sup>13</sup>. The challenges of the next hundred years will require the same trailblazing vision and firm dedication that shaped the foundations of Oral Medicine, ensuring its evolution as a dynamic and indispensable specialty in global healthcare. Moreover, achieving broader recognition from health systems, policy makers, and patients is paramount to securing the field's sustainability and influence. Additionally, the development of new private business models is essential to increasing the availability of specialized care while ensuring the financial viability of private Oral Medicine practices<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, expanding scientific advancements in Oral Medicine through advanced research programs and increased funding will be critical in ensuring the specialty's growth and sustainability. Complementary to these efforts, strategies aimed at improving Oral Medicine literacy among lay communities and healthcare professionals including family physicians should be prioritized as a pathway to long-term impact.

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