Seaweed colloids in your toothpaste?

An interview with dentist and toothpaste collector Dr. Val Kolpakov

Dentist Val Kolpakov has an unusual hobby: he collects toothpaste. His collection is currently recognized as the largest in the world by the World Records Academy. Born in Russia, Kolpakov moved to the United States in 1993 to work as a researcher at the University of Michigan.

For the past nine years, he has been in practice at his own dental offices in Saginaw, Mich., and Alpharetta, Ga. Kolpakov spoke to Dental Tribune International Editor Yvonne Bachmann about his collecting passion, radioactive collectibles and seaweed in our toothpaste.

When did you get the idea to start collecting toothpaste?

It was 2002 and I was browsing the Internet. This was when I found some information on Carsten Gutzeit, a man from Germany who collected toothpaste. His collection stood at roughly 500 tubes. This was when I realized what a wonderful hobby collecting toothpaste would be for a dental professional. Imagine the opportunities it offers to learn about other variations of your profession. With this in mind, I decided to start my own collection of toothpaste.

How did you get your collection?

I have friends living all over the world, so I asked them to mail me some of the toothpaste sold in their countries. In addition, I bought old toothpaste on eBay while acquiring contemporary ones in stores.

After putting up the Toothpaste World website, people began finding me on the Internet. There were several people who donated their small collections to me. Companies also donated their old and recent products.

Do you usually buy two samples, one to try and one to keep?

No, I normally just get one sample. I already spend a lot of money on my toothpaste collection and...
doubling the amount would be too much. Often, it is not even possible in the case of old tubes — which are rare finds to begin with. If I am tempted to try a toothpaste that I have in my collection, I just open the only sample I have. All my old toothpastes are so dried up that I don’t think anybody would be willing to try them in their mouth.

How many items do you have in your collection? The most difficult part of collecting toothpaste is keeping track of all the samples I get. I estimate that I have 2,000 samples. However, I cannot tell you the exact number at this time. I have more than 1,700 tubes counted and entered into my database, but there are several big boxes with more samples waiting for their turn.

Where do you keep your toothpastes? Some of them are displayed in the waiting room of my dental office in Saginaw. However, most of them are stored in boxes. We are currently remodeling our office and planning to build a huge custom-made display for my collection, pretty much making a toothpaste museum of sorts. Anybody can come to my office and look at the samples displayed. I can also show other samples stored in boxes to interested people.

Do you know any other people who collect toothpaste or dental equipment? I keep in touch with Carsten Guthzeit from Germany, whose collection inspired me. We have exchanged some toothpaste tubes. Since I started my collection, I have been contacted by several people who have small collections of toothpaste. Some of them have donated their entire collections to me.

There is also a good collection of toothpowder tins at my alma mater, the University of Michigan dental school. They also have a very good collection of various vintage dental items.

Which are the most interesting items in your collection? I would consider one item to be the oldest, most rare and most expensive: a silver, English antique Georgian toothpowder box from 1801. This was a time when toothpaste had not yet been invented and toothpowders were used instead. I paid over $1,500 for it. The oldest toothpaste I have is dated 1908 and was made by Colgate.

My favorite kinds of toothpaste are alcohol flavored. These range from whiskey, like scotch, rye and bourbon to red wine, amaretto, champagne and many more. Another passion of mine is chocolate-flavored toothpaste. I have a set of pure chocolate cream packaged in a toothpaste tube with a toothbrush for chocolate lovers. This is more of a gag gift, considering that it is not intended for brushing teeth regularly.

However, there are several real tubes of toothpaste with chocolate flavoring as well. Speaking of unusual flavors, the Breath Palette Company tops them all. They came up with 51 flavors, including some of the oddest kinds such as Green Tea, Pumpkin Pudding and Indian Curry.

My most unusual collectible is Doramad toothpaste, which was dug out of World War II trenches and has an active radioactive compound. At that time, some people believed that radiation could revive dead tissues and that radioactive toothpaste could revive gums.

What do you estimate the value of your collection to be? I have spent close to $20,000 on all my samples. Considering all the work and time I have spent on my collection over the last nine years, I would estimate it at $50,000. But at that time, I have not even started selling it. It is my hobby, my passion, the way for me to attract people’s attention to my dental practice and spread information about this wonderful topic.

Are toothpastes generally the same? Is toothpaste bought in Japan any different from toothpaste bought in Italy? The main ingredients of all toothpastes are basically the same. However, there are local differences in flavor and some ingredients. Oriental toothpastes often contain ingredients like hambo ok or ginseng. Japan is well known for its high-tech toothpastes that rebuild enamel, remineralize teeth and halt the development of caries.

Is there something people may not know about toothpaste? You may not recognize the scientific names listed on toothpaste packaging, and thus may be surprised to know that ingredients such as seaweed can be found in many fluoridated toothpastes. According to the American Dental Association, thickening materials include seaweed colloids, mineral colloids and natural gums.

Do you collect any other unusual items? I have a small collection of denture containers — holders of different shapes in which edentulous people place their dentures for the night. I also have a collection of dental movie props, including some fake teeth that actors put over their own teeth to look like vampires or homeless people with rotten teeth.

Do you hold a Guinness World Record? I’ve considered applying to the Guinness World Records for a long time, but just can’t seem to find the time. Recently, I was contacted by an English journalist who interviewed me and wrote a story about my collection for an English newspaper.

Somebody at the Guinness World Records may not know about toothpaste?
Miracle Corners of the World (MCW), a U.S.-based non-profit organization, recently sent a team from the United States to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to inspect and oversee the installation of state-of-the-art dental laboratory equipment. The initiative was part of a second Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed in October 2010 between MCW and the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS).

The project builds on an earlier MOU, signed in September 2008, devoted to bringing the MUHAS School of Dentistry and MCW together to collaborate on an oral health-care initiative supported by in-kind donations by private sector companies.

Tanzanian President H.E. Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete and leadership from the Ministry of Health have supported the project from the beginning.

Dr. Paulo Sarita, former head of restorative dentistry, made a compelling argument to Dr. Marion Bergman, MCW’s director of health-care projects. In a proposal submitted to MCW by the dental school...