

President's Column

REACHING OUT TO FEEL THE PULSE



Dr. John Diggins

One of the criticisms often laid against national organizations like CDA is that they are too remote and unresponsive to the needs and wants of members. The analogy of political institutions comes to mind. Canadian citizens increasingly seem to say that "Ottawa is too far from our everyday lives and the people there don't listen to our concerns."

An organization like ours must take such concerns seriously if it is to survive as an effective national voice for the Canadian dental profession. Those of us who run CDA need to reach out and listen to Canadian dentists to find out what CDA can best do for them and how we can advance the cause of optimal oral health with the Canadian public, government and the business sector.

I read recently that in the United States, the dental profession is considered the most cohesive of all the health professions. Down there, members

must be involved in all three levels of organized dentistry — local, state and national — if they wish to belong at all. I'm sure that when the time comes to pay membership dues, even U.S. dentists ask what their national organization does for them.

It is easy to see how national organizations can seem remote, just like their federal counterpart. We see tangible manifestations of local government every day. We see police cars on the streets, we hear the sirens of fire trucks. If our garbage isn't collected, we have an unpleasant mess in our driveway. Provincial government is also in our lives on a daily basis with the bricks and mortar of infrastructure in every community, from schools to hospitals to motor vehicle licensing facilities.

However, many aspects of national government seem to take place behind the scenes, or far afield. The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade scarcely touches our daily lives, yet its activities define Canada's place in the world for outsiders. Similarly, the peacekeeping activities of our armed forces present an image of Canada to the outside world as a country that takes its international responsibilities seriously.

I often think of CDA as being a bit like the federal government. It is a diplomatic service that is building and maintaining relationships with external bodies. It is a military force that can be mobilized to defend the best interests of the dental profession when there are threats from external sources. It is also an intelligence agency that gathers, processes and delivers information to the dental profession on matters relating to clinical decision making, issues critical to the development of the profession, as well as political and business information.

It is one thing for me to have this vision of CDA, quite another to find out what members feel are its strengths and its value.

In preparation for the recent executive council planning session, we asked a

sample of dentists and the CEOs of the corporate member organizations what they perceived the role and strengths of CDA to be. In this informal poll, you told us that CDA is an effective national voice for the profession. That we are at our best when we communicate with government, the public and the business sector about strategies for improving the oral health of Canadians. You told us that CDA is very good at bringing together the best minds in the profession to come up with unified positions that relate to clinical issues and ways to deliver the best oral health care. You told us that we have an infrastructure that has the potential to deliver high-quality information to support dentists as clinicians and as business people.

It's funny how close your vision of CDA is to mine. I know that all of organized dentistry must adopt the principles of modern business management to survive and thrive in the next decade. One of the commitments I heard loud and clear from executive council at the planning session was to reach out and bring the dentists of Canada into the decision-making process at CDA. We have so much talent in our ranks. I invite you to become an active member of the Association; your ideas and your vision are needed to guide the profession in the turbulent years ahead.

You know you can always contact me with your concerns and your ideas. My sincere desire is that we can work together to optimize the oral health of our fellow citizens while maintaining the primacy of the dentist as the oral health care provider of choice. These are goals that impact on every dentist in this country, and in my opinion, deserve to be supported by all.

I want to wish you all a happy festive season. May the year 2000 bring you professional satisfaction as you provide oral health care to the best of your ability.

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