

Editorial

THE QUIET REVOLUTION IN DENTISTRY



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In the film *The Other Sister*, which I watched over the holidays, the father of the lead female is a dentist. This character is portrayed as a middle-aged white American male who seems to be a solid citizen with all the trappings of financial success. His political leanings are also made evident. In a scene where he and his wife discuss how their grown children have not turned out too badly, he says, "At least none of them became a Democrat."

I suspect that this popular portrayal of dentists would probably strike a chord with many in Canada today. Approximately 80% of Canadian dentists are male, and federal tax return figures peg our incomes as being second only to physicians among the liberal professions. At least part of this portrait is about to change dramatically as the profession undergoes a demographic "make-over."

I think it is accurate to say that the dental student population has become very diverse and cosmopolitan in recent years. Women now make up 50% of the student body in most Canadian dental schools. This is a major change from the mid-'60s when you could count the

number of female class members on the fingers of one hand.

A whole host of social and economic factors underpin this trend not just in our profession and not just in Canada. The career expectations of women today differ greatly from those of their mothers and grandmothers, with female participation in the workforce rising dramatically in recent decades. The type of career sought by women is also evolving — as many American women now choose to study medicine as nursing. What constitutes "women's work" also varies from country to country.

In 1977, I attended an international dental student conference and learned that in Finland dentistry was perceived as "a woman's profession." Today, the medical profession is made up of an equal number of men and women in the Scandinavian countries. What will be the impact of this shift in the composition of the professional workforce? There has been far more research done in medicine than in dentistry about the impact of the feminization of the profession. A Canadian Medical Association survey (<http://www.cma.ca/cmaj/vol-163/issue-5/prq/index.htm>) shows that female physicians, who constitute 28% of the total Canadian physician population, provide 6.2 less hours per week of direct patient care than their male counterparts (30.8 versus 37 hours). Female physicians tend to work in salaried positions more commonly than men (10.1% versus 6.8%), and slightly fewer of them work in fee-for-service (FFS) practice (58.3%) than male physicians (63.9%). When asked which type of remuneration method they would prefer, 41.9% of men would prefer straight FFS, while just 28.2% of women have a preference for that method of compensation.

The Director General of the WHO, herself a physician, commented in a recent editorial (http://www.jamwa.org/vol55/55_1_ed.htm) that, even though more women were entering medicine, there was not full gender equality in the profession. She cited research that

showed that female physicians lag behind their male counterparts in terms of educational attainment, remuneration and training. She also indicates that in her native Norway, where there is equality in terms of numbers of men and women physicians, men occupy leadership positions in the profession 3 times more frequently than women.

I would assume that there are many reasons why these differences exist. I am not sure how many parallels can be drawn between medicine and dentistry in terms of these phenomena, or whether they even prevail in the Canadian dental profession. In a quick Medline search, I found no research on the impact of the feminization of the dental profession in Canada.

I believe there is an urgent need for our profession to look at this issue, because it has the potential to have a major impact on the supply of dental care in the future. One national dental organization in the United States has described the feminization of the dental profession as the single most important upcoming change in terms of the supply of dental services. We need research into this aspect of our profession so that we can make knowledge-based decisions about a vital human resources matter.

Canadian dentists who have an interest in the evolving role of women in the dental profession will have a unique opportunity to learn more about this subject later this year. The American Dental Education Association is holding its second international women's leadership conference in Vancouver, B.C., from October 3 to 6. Titled "Global Health Through Women's Leadership," this meeting could serve as a catalyst for Canadian research into an important area impacting on the future of our profession. The JCDA will provide more details about this conference in upcoming editions.

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