

Editorial

DENTISTRY IN 2020



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Over the past couple of years I have read a lot about the future of the health professions in North America. As an interest, I have been examining trends impacting on the professions and attempting to project their possible impact on dentistry.

In the course of my reading I came across a wonderful phrase: "Everything that can be invented, has been invented." You might be forgiven for thinking the phrase had been uttered recently. In fact, it dates from 1899 and is attributed to a commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office at that time. It immediately struck a chord with me because it said to me that we can't easily imagine what we don't know.

I meet with dental students on a fairly regular basis and always ask what they imagine the profession and their working lives will look like in 20 years. Invariably the students reply that they expect dentistry to be practised in exactly the same way as it is today.

Perhaps I am being heretical when I question the likelihood of that prediction coming true. So much has changed in the profession in the last 20 years that it is essentially a different profession. In 1980,

when I graduated in Ireland, our dental regulatory authority was composed solely of dentists, there were no dental hygienists, I had never heard of Medline or managed care, and infection control consisted of hand washing and dry heat sterilization. Certainly consumerism and litigation were not nearly as prominent then as they are now. So when I hear the students say that things will be the same in 2020, I have to smile a little.

The trends I see developing in health care in North America could have a profound impact on our profession. In looking forward, I oscillate between optimism and pessimism. My best guess is that the next 2 decades promise to be very positive for the dental profession. Yet there are enough trends to indicate that our leaders will need to position the profession to deal effectively with some challenging possibilities.

Conventional wisdom dictates that the baby boomers and older adults will create a large demand for restorative and cosmetic dentistry over the next 20 years. In part because of media attention, society has become enthralled by how dentistry can improve beauty and raise the quality of life. The baby boomers are wealthy and health conscious, and they are likely to demand the best that dentistry can offer. If elements in the external environment of the profession remain relatively stable, the coming 20 years promise to be very exciting.

Looking at other trends, there is a likelihood that the delivery of health care in Canada could change dramatically in the years ahead. Despite the protestations of all political parties in the recent federal election that what is known as Medicare is sacrosanct, I find it difficult to believe that there will not be a mixed private/public system of physician and hospital care in the not too distant future. Large private sector corporations could some day deliver integrated health services to Canadians. Such organizations would likely seek to devise new mechanisms for compensating upper-income health professionals to keep costs down. The

spectre of managed care, while seemingly dormant in Canada for the present, has not gone away for good in my estimation.

I will go out on a limb by predicting that changes in the manner of regulating the health professions in Canada could have a profound effect before 2020. Because the political philosophy of present and future governments will continue to emphasize consumer choice, and because consumers will demand transparency in the governance of the professions, a number of changes could easily be made to our licensing laws.

Other occupations could be granted total autonomy as health care professionals, allowing them to become the primary health care providers for a sizeable segment of the population. Another possible change is that non-professionals will comprise a majority of the members of professional regulatory authorities. Through these appointees, governments could take a much more active role in ensuring the continuing competence of professionals and supervising disciplinary matters.

Developments in technology may reduce demand for the services of traditional health professionals. Some of these breakthroughs may be in the areas of risk assessment, home diagnostics and home preventive treatments. Dental caries and periodontal disease levels may drop further, creating a situation where a few dentists may supervise the work of a large number of other dental personnel. That could set our current human resource plans on their ear.

Am I off the mark? To keep me grounded, I would really appreciate hearing your visions about the future of our profession. What can we do collectively to ensure that high-quality dental care is available to all Canadians in the year 2020?

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