

# President's Profile

## DR. GEORGE SWEETNAM — PREPARED FOR PRESIDENCY

*CDA president Dr. Burton Conrod and I would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to the Association's incoming president, Dr. Sweetnam, through this profile, published in lieu of the president's column.*

*- Dr. John O'Keefe, Editor-in-chief*



*Dr. George Sweetnam*

While he never aspired to high office, on November 16 Dr. George Sweetnam will assume his duties as president of the Canadian Dental Association. Eighteen years ago, he was busy raising his family and running his general practice in Lindsay, Ontario. But an invitation from his local dental society to become involved marked the start of a long journey.

"Around the same time that the Peterborough and District Dental

Society approached me, I wrote a letter to the communications committee of the Ontario Dental Association (ODA) with my thoughts on how they should be fighting capitation," he recalls. "The next thing I knew, I was on both the executive of the dental society and the ODA's communications committee."

Dr. Sweetnam's involvement with the ODA culminated in his presidency in 1993. He began representing his provincial association on CDA's board of governors in 1994 and in 1996, he became the ODA representative on CDA's executive council.

"CDA's operating culture allows you to use your experience and take on positions of greater responsibility, while the democratic process and your peers evaluate your contribution," says Dr. Sweetnam. "I will do my best to prove worthy of the office they are entrusting to me."

Dr. Sweetnam holds the profession of dentistry in high esteem. "If I can contribute to furthering this ideal through involvement, then I get satisfaction," he says. Other rewards include the opportunity to expand his knowledge and experience, to delve into interesting issues and to work with dedicated staff and volunteers. Moreover, the work is never done. "Just when one issue is under control, another problem emerges," says Dr. Sweetnam.

With some problems, such as government relations issues, the difficulty is demonstrating value to members when the desired outcomes are a series of small victories. "The average dentist may not understand why there are not instant victories," says Dr. Sweetnam. "That was a shock to me when I got involved in organized dentistry. Being the authority on dentistry doesn't matter to government. Being the authority on politics does."

Dr. Sweetnam demonstrated his political astuteness this past year when, as chair of the government relations steering committee, he led a shift in strategy intended to resolve dentistry's concerns with the federal government's Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program. The shift came after initial attempts, aimed at the bureaucratic level, proved fruitless. Dr. Sweetnam, along with his fellow committee members and CDA management committee colleagues, began raising the issue in the political arena where they garnered attention. Soon after, senior federal bureaucrats responsible for administering the program requested a list of dentistry's principal concerns and proposed solutions.

Dr. Sweetnam cites NIHB as an example of CDA tackling a national issue for the benefit of the entire profession, albeit there are regional concerns. To hear these concerns, CDA hosted a forum of provincial representatives in June. Dr. Sweetnam was pleasantly surprised by provincial reaction to an Ontario proposal to have a national body negotiate fees for services provided under the program. "Even Health Canada agreed," he says. "Now that everyone is on board, we can move forward on this issue."

In grappling with national issues on behalf of the profession, Dr. Sweetnam's greatest frustration is hearing individuals criticize CDA "for their own political gain." He believes that some people spend their lives in opposition roles rather than trying to build and improve. "CDA is not perfect," he says "but we're working on it."

Perfecting CDA's governance structure will be Dr. Sweetnam's most immediate challenge. The process, initiated under his predecessors, is crucial because "we have to be capable of responding to breaking issues far more rapidly than we can under the current structure," he says. With

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biannual board meetings, it takes a minimum of 6 months for a decision to be made and if further consultation is requested, it can take 12 to 18 months. "We have to make a few people accountable for decisions that have to be made more rapidly."

"We also have to be knowledge-based rather than constituency-based," he says, offering a sports analogy to illustrate. "If you are going to field a national team, are you going to take the all-stars from across the country or are you going to take one from each house league?" The approach proposed to CDA's board of governors by the governance review steering committee is that the Association field the all-star team from across the country.

"What regional issue has occupied CDA and made it necessary to have constituency and voting representation," he asks rhetorically. "No matter what region you're from, CDA is dealing with national issues that have national solutions for the good of us all," continues Dr. Sweetnam, who recognizes that it can be difficult for dentists to shift from regional thinking to national thinking. "Dentists are loners by occupation and they are fine detailed perfectionists, so it's difficult to step back and take a global perspective." Nonetheless, Dr. Sweetnam trusts the profession to do just that. He cites historic victories on managed care and capitation, the issue that initiated his involvement in organized dentistry.

Regardless of the issue on Dr. Sweetnam's agenda, he finds that managing the process is the greatest challenge. "You know in your own mind what needs to be done, but the big picture process to get it approved can be challenging," he says. "You have to get organized, develop strategy and present it in such a way as to get support." A related challenge involves getting people to look far enough ahead into the future and to understand that a position or situation which satisfies self-interest today may

prove troublesome tomorrow if action is not taken.

Two situations are of particular concern to Dr. Sweetnam at present. "Being from small-town rural Ontario, I see the economic concerns of the working poor on a daily basis," he says, "and I worry that the profession must keep dental treatment affordable if dentists wish to keep the public trust." He fears that the cost of keeping pace with technology and other office overhead expenses is putting the cost of treatment out of reach. "Who is going to offer affordable treatment to the little guy on the street? From the government's perspective, he has a vote," says Dr. Sweetnam, warning that dentistry must care for this sector of society or government will enable auxiliaries to do so.

A developing trend in dental school admission is also distressing to Dr. Sweetnam. If candidates are not accepted with one prerequisite degree, they return to university to gain a second degree before reapplying to dental school. "I recently spoke with one person who had 3 degrees, the latest being in neurophysiology." Dr. Sweetnam doubts that these future dentists will be content treating the routine dental needs presented in general practice. He predicts that they are going to want to be specialists and do highly technical work. "It's important for dentistry to attract well-rounded individuals to serve all segments of the population in all regions of the country," he says.

Along with a genuine concern for the profession and the public it serves, Dr. Sweetnam will bring a wealth of life experience to the office of CDA president. As a student, he spent summers surveying and engineering in the region surrounding his family's home in New Liskeard, located in Northern Ontario. Interestingly, this included a summer job opening the Adams Mine site that

was the centre of the Toronto garbage debate last year.

Dr. Sweetnam chose to study microbiology rather than engineering, however, and he selected the University of Guelph to pursue his degree. After graduation, he spent a year with Seagram's, but exposure to industry still left him unsatisfied. His interest in the medical aspects of microbiology, a knack for working with his hands and the desire for a fixed location all contributed to Dr. Sweetnam's choice of a career in dentistry. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1971 and settled in Lindsay where he and his wife Marian have raised 3 children.

"Now that the kids have grown up and left home, Marian and I are enjoying doing our own thing," he says. In his spare time, Dr. Sweetnam flies his float plane and plays trombone in a Glenn Miller-style swing band. The band is scheduled to make a special appearance at his president's installation dinner where colleagues will welcome their 83<sup>rd</sup> president.