

# Editorial

## BUILD TRUST OR BE TRUSSED!



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

There may be many reasons why your investment portfolio took a dive recently. One new explanation that emerged this summer is the public disquiet about the practices of some of the accounting firms that audit the financial statements of publicly traded companies. Investors are cautious about buying stock these days, because they can't trust companies' financial statements.

And trust, which is very easy to lose, is so hard to regain. Among the solutions proposed to restore investor confidence is what I interpret to be an alteration in the concept of self-regulation for accountants, which could impact on other professions over time. Predictably, confidence in the health professions was never far from the news during the silly season either.

One day this summer, a newspaper was emblazoned with a banner headline declaring that physicians have lost the public trust. The article was based on an interpretation of a Canadian Medical Association (CMA) discussion paper entitled *Professionalism in Medicine*.

This document examines the nature of professionalism and how it is being challenged in today's society ([www.cma.ca](http://www.cma.ca), search "professionalism").

The story focused on external challenges to medical professionalism identified by the CMA document, which included commercialism in medicine; consumerism; the involvement of third parties; and the infiltration of "industrial" values, such as efficiency, into the organization of care.

The CMA discussion paper also highlighted internal challenges to professionalism, which included the increasing difficulty of maintaining self-regulation; a perceived tilting of the balance away from public service to self-interest; and a sense that clinical autonomy may lead to variations in treatment patterns. The discussion paper honestly and openly admits that these issues exist and that the profession must deal with them responsibly.

The fact that the newspaper reporter concludes the public has lost trust in the profession is an indication of how fashionable "doctor-bashing" has become. While dentistry is close to medicine, we are thankfully not in the same boat, given the recent declared intention of one provincial government to order physicians to work in designated places for stipulated hours at set compensation levels.

Despite the differences in delivery modes, I believe that our profession, like medicine, needs to be very aware of the importance of professionalism and the challenges it is now facing. Because if we don't nurture society's trust, we are likely to be forced by its decision-makers to relinquish self-regulation.

Our medical colleagues are taking the issues of public trust and professionalism very seriously indeed. The CMA's board of directors declared that "protecting and enhancing professionalism in medicine" was one of the Association's priorities for 2001.

In the same vein, an international collaboration of medical organizations published a *Charter on Medical Professionalism* ([www.professionalism.org](http://www.professionalism.org)). The authors recognize that many forces are challenging medicine's commitment to patient welfare, but call for a renewing of professionalism — seen as the basis of the profession's contract with society. The crucial elements of this ideal are that the professional places the interests of patients first, and that standards of competence and integrity are adhered to.

The list of professional responsibilities set out in the charter includes commitments to professional competence, scientific knowledge, patient confidentiality, maintaining appropriate relations with patients, and improving quality of care and access to care. These responsibilities fall equally on our shoulders as dentists.

Exactly 100 years ago this month, the Canadian Dental Association was founded for the purpose of raising the standards of the practice of dentistry in all jurisdictions in Canada. The ideals articulated by our founding fathers are very similar to those recently published by our medical colleagues. I call on CDA to publicly renew our "marriage vows" with the tenets set forth by our founders and declare professionalism as a priority issue for Canadian dentistry as we move into the second century of our organization's history.

I believe that public trust is the most important issue facing our profession, and strong professional leadership is needed as never before. I would hate to see the hands of dentists tied because of public mistrust.

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