

Editorial

LEADING FROM THE FRONT



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With the approach of the holiday season and feelings of good cheer, we can reflect on how lucky we are as individuals. Dentists are blessed with a wonderful profession that offers many advantages others can only dream of.

According to the sociology literature, the hallmarks of a successful profession are legitimacy in the eyes of society, market power and organizational cohesion. On all 3 counts, Canadian dentistry scores highly. Ours is a respected profession with a scientific foundation. The return on investment for our professional education is arguably surpassed only in medicine. Despite some cracks at the seams, our professional organizations are the envy of the world.

As we reflect on our good fortune, our thoughts are surely drawn to

those less fortunate than ourselves who have poor health, suffer from poverty or marginalization, and who are aged or alone. It should be of particular concern to us that these people tend to have the worst oral health.

Surveys consistently show that the burden of oral ill health is borne disproportionately by the most vulnerable groups in society. Paradoxically, those who most need our expertise have the least access to oral health care. When they do access our care, people in these groups often complain that their interaction with our profession is less than satisfactory.

In an article published in the December 2003 edition of *Social Science and Medicine*, a group of Quebec-based researchers noted that social assistance recipients often receive extractions rather than more conservative treatments. These individuals feel that they are talked down to in dental offices and may hold our profession in lower regard than we would like. Working with this group of patients myself, I feel they should have access to more comprehensive care than the emergency treatments that tend to be covered by public programs.

Surely, the issue of access to oral health care for the most vulnerable groups in society is one that requires true leadership on the part of the dental profession and, crucially, coalition-building with interested stakeholders. We cannot, and cannot be expected to, solve society's oral health problems on our own. But if we don't take a visible and vocal leadership role in advocating optimal oral health for all Canadians, others may attempt to fill the void.

We must not pat ourselves on the back that all is rosy in the Canadian dental garden. If the U.S. Surgeon General says there is a silent epidemic of oral disease in that country (and my

clinical experience tells me that the same situation exists here), we must not ignore the challenge that this poses to our profession. So what do we do about it?

We need to raise the public profile of oral health and its importance to general health with decision-makers, media and the general public. While I have nothing against esthetic dentistry, agreeing that it can be health-enhancing, our profession shouldn't only focus on esthetics when speaking about oral health matters to the outside world. We must never forget to highlight the considerable pain and suffering experienced by a significant number of Canadians due to oral ill health. Surely, this is an unenviable state of affairs in a rich civilized country like ours.

Canada needs a National Oral Health Strategy that will focus on promoting oral health (especially among vulnerable groups), help us measure the burden and consequences of oral ill health, and propose ways to get much-needed oral health care to those who need it urgently.

The Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Dental Directors Working Group (www.fptdd.ca) has taken the initiative to generate such a strategy. The dental profession should put its shoulder to the wheel and work hard to achieve the same goals. Speaking of "dental directors," I believe we should also advocate firmly that each government in Canada must employ an oral health leader in an advisory capacity.

Given that there's still so much work before us, it's a wonder we have time for holidays. To meet the challenges ahead, let's recharge our batteries and have some fun. Peace, good health and happiness to you and yours!

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