

# A Challenge to Dentists to Take a Leading Role in the Evolution of Canadian Health Care

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© J Can Dent Assoc 2005; 71(11):845-7

The time has come for health care professionals to stop being passive observers of a health support network that is losing touch with an increasingly well-informed and empowered population. Dentists may be providers of care, but they are also among the most knowledgeable patients or clients in the national health care system. We have committed our working lives to developing ways to help people be healthier, we have pioneered preventive methods, and we have developed effective and efficient management models for care. It is now time for our profession to embrace its role as a leader in the evolution of health care in Canada.

Ten years ago I decided to make a difference in the crisis in the Canadian health care system. To this end, I have written *Journey to Wellness*, a book about the radical idea of designing a health care system centred around the patient, and have helped to create a national organization, the Canadian Association for People-Centred Health (CAPCH), through which the grassroots can be heard. The experience has been rewarding, but much remains to be done. I invite each of you to become part of the solution by helping to create a health care system in which people come first.

### The Times Are Changing but the System Is Not

Information technology is creating a new paradigm in health care, and we must embrace

this reality. Consider the following quotation from a report of the Information Therapy conference that was held in September 2005:

Paul Wallace (Executive Director of the Kaiser Permanente Care Management Institute and new Chairman of the Center for Information Therapy Board of Directors) closed the conference by describing the 3 shifts in the last 1000 years of teaching medicine. From about 1000 to 1500, “the only person who had the book was the professor.” After the invention of the printing press, “the medical students finally had the book,” which posed a big challenge to the medical school faculty of the time. That archetype basically lasted for the next 500 years, but “now, the patient has the book.” That represents the paradigm shift of the new millennium.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this current shift, people are able to access information and manage their health in ways that were previously impossible. Gone are the days when people blindly did what their health care providers told them to do. The role of health care professionals in this new paradigm is to support the informed client rather than simply to care for the patient. A rapidly increasing number of clients know their options, and indeed these people constitute the driving force for change. As a result, we must have effective teams of profes-

sionals who can help Canadians to make informed decisions and who can provide the services necessary to fulfill their needs, rather than the services the provider thinks they need.

Canadians keep looking to governments to find solutions for the health system crisis, but to date governments at all levels have failed to be visionary. The results of public opinion polls and the promises needed to win the next election are not criteria on which we can build a system that helps each person to realize his or her potential with respect to a personally defined balance of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being. Perhaps it is time to go to the people for ideas.

On October 20, 2005, CAPCH and *Journey to Wellness* were launched with one fundamental objective: to make a difference in the future of health care by making our health care system more responsive to the needs of the people. CAPCH is a national not-for-profit, nonpartisan, grassroots organization that is committed to researching, designing and sharing ways to make our system a “people first” system. The book *Journey to Wellness* presents a vision and comprehensive proposal for a people-centred system and will challenge you to change the way you look at the issues in health care.

### **Eight Ways Dentists Can Be Leaders and Make a Difference**

1. Examine our office policies and procedures from the patient’s perspective, and evaluate how we can put people first and support principles of optimal health. We claim to treat everyone as family, but do we? Do we really empower each person to be the manager of his or her own care? Do we present all options to clients, or just the ones that fit an insurance plan?
2. Challenge health leaders to re-evaluate the system from the patient’s perspective. Use the current federal election campaign as an opportunity to stop the political rhetoric, encourage debate about the real issues and begin to clarify a vision. The health of those we love is in the balance. Challenge politicians and health leaders to address the following issues:
  - Since the Canada Health Act was written, virtually everything has changed in health and health care: who can provide care, the types of illnesses that occur, the types of care that are available, the ability of patients to participate in their own care, the goals and expectations of the people, the diversification of cultures, even the definition of health. All of this has changed, but the underlying system of providing care has remained the same. Why?
  - We don’t have a health system — we have an illness system. What does this mean, and why is this situation not openly discussed?

- We don’t have a health act — we have an insurance act. Why is this not open for discussion?
  - We don’t have health principles — we have insurance principles. What are principles of health, and why don’t we build our system around them?
  - We are supposed to know all our options, have the right of choice and the right of informed consent. Outside of the publicly funded system, it is unethical for providers to design their diagnosis and treatment plans according to the limitations imposed by an insurance company. Inside the publicly funded system, doctors are penalized if they accept reward for going beyond the limitations of the publicly funded insurance plan. Why do we allow governments to continue this double standard?
3. Challenge our clients to stop passively accepting political or provider solutions and begin to be managers of their own health care system.
  4. Challenge other health care professionals to be leaders. Together we can make a difference.
  5. Challenge our provincial and national associations to be leaders in developing a people-centred vision.
  6. Share your ideas and encourage others to do the same. Enter the “CAPCH Challenge” on how to make the system more responsive to the needs of the people. Details will be available in January 2006 at the CAPCH Web site ([www.capch.ca](http://www.capch.ca)).
  7. Become a member of CAPCH and support the many not-for-profit initiatives to put people, not politics or providers, first.
  8. Most importantly, begin your own personal wellness program and demand a system that supports it. Wellness begins with each one of us. It will take 32 million people to save our health care system.

This new paradigm means moving to a people-first system, not because politicians or health care professionals are leading the way but because informed people are no longer willing to compromise their health care to fit the existing system, are demanding access to (and management of) their health records and will demand people-centred funding, management and legislative models.

It is time to create a system that encourages Canadians to stop being patients in the system and to start being managers of their personal health systems. Putting more money into the current system and making small tweaks may help politicians win elections, but it will not save the health care system. The system must evolve. The crisis will only be averted when each person accepts responsibility for their part of the solution; the people who have invested their working lives in health care (including dentists) must lead the way.

The board and members of CAPCH invite you to stop pointing fingers and to challenge yourself and others to be part of the solution. ➤

## THE AUTHOR

*Dr. Glover has been in private practice for over 30 years. He is the author of Journey to Wellness: Designing a People-Centred Health System for Canadians and is the founder of the Canadian Association for People-Centred Health (CAPCH), a not-for-profit, grassroots organization dedicated to finding ways to make our health system more responsive to the needs of Canadians. For more information on CAPCH and to become a member, visit the Web site [www.capch.ca](http://www.capch.ca) or call (613) 623-9500.*

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*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.*

## Reference

1. The Center for Information Therapy. 2005 Ix conference report: transforming consumer decision making. September 21–23, 2005. Available from: URL: [http://www.informationtherapy.org/rs\\_conf\\_rpt05.html](http://www.informationtherapy.org/rs_conf_rpt05.html) (accessed December 2005).

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