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## One Wall Worth Preserving

During a recent visit to Berlin, I was impressed with the city's strong sense of history yet striking modernity. New buildings are appearing as part of the construction boom that accompanied the city's reunification following the fall of the Wall. The coexistence of the “old” and the “new” makes Berlin at once a traditional and avant-garde city.

While I was window shopping there one Sunday, a particular shopfront caught my attention. Calling itself a Dental Wellness Lounge, this modern retail outlet had consumer oral hygiene products for sale in its window display. Beautifully modern dental operatories could be seen inside. Although the store was closed, I gathered that this was a dental “smile shop,” primarily selling tooth whitening and oral hygiene services and products.

I found it interesting, given the overtly commercial nature of the dental lounge, that its immediate neighbour was an equivalent shop selling beauty and hair care products and services. Customers could very efficiently take care of their esthetic requirements by visiting these 2 establishments.

This smile shop concept reminded me of how dentistry must always walk the fine line between its legitimate roles as a business and a profession. I continue to hear rumblings from colleagues concerned that some members of our profession are projecting an image that is “too commercial.” This concern about the excessive commercialism of dentistry was clearly articulated at a conference I attended in Chicago.

The 2-day meeting, organized jointly by the American Dental Association and the American College of Dentists, brought together leaders from many of the organizations that represent our profession in North America. The conference attendees identified manifestations of excessive commercialism that they are witnessing on a

regular basis and that may be eroding the public trust in the profession.

Participants were asked to rate potential factors contributing to the commercialism of dentistry. Those ranked highest were: 1) society stresses financial success and a “me first” attitude; 2) traditional professional ideals are insufficiently emphasized; 3) debt from dental school adversely affects the professional behaviour of young dentists and promotes commercialism; 4) continuing education courses depict and promote dentistry as a commercial endeavour; and 5) practice management courses overly emphasize profit and business success.

Many were concerned that this commercialism discourse will have harmful consequences on dentistry's current position in society — one founded on being a science-based healing profession. Attendees bemoaned the fact that the public doesn't seem to place the same value on expertise as the profession does. As we move away from being a health care profession to providers of esthetic services, we will be pressured to operate more on our customers' terms rather than our own. This trend will entail a lowering of the value placed on being a “profession.”

The meeting attendees proposed an action plan to counter the excessive commercialism of dentistry and to ensure that perceptions of the general public and policy makers toward our profession will not be irreparably tarnished.

Some notable recommendations included: creating realistic expectations for patients about what outcomes good dental care can provide; reinforcing the message that oral health is an important component of overall health; mounting a significant campaign to promote comprehensive oral health care; getting more young dentists involved in organized dentistry; increasing incentives for practising in underserved communities; advocating for increased reimbursement levels for underserved populations; and increasing expectations that dental care is based on scientifically grounded claims.

This is an ambitious agenda, but one that these leaders feel is necessary for the future of our profession. Like Berlin, dentistry has always adhered to the traditional and displayed a dynamism founded in entrepreneurship. I just hope that we don't tear down the wall separating us from excessive commercialism.

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