



Dr. Wayne Halstrom

Oral Care for a Lifetime

For many years, the profession has focused its message of prevention at our younger patients. Dentistry's substantial efforts in trying to eliminate dental caries, a disease process that would otherwise keep our livelihood afloat, demonstrate the profession's altruistic nature and show that our patients' well-being is the ultimate priority. However, changing demographic patterns in this country are presenting new challenges that will require a similar compassionate regard for the needs of our older patients.

On the whole, Canadians are living longer and have higher quality of life expectations from retirement onwards. Many of today's seniors are now able to keep their teeth in their mouth rather than on a bedside table at night. Yet their dentition has often been extensively repaired or restored.

Obtaining an accurate picture of seniors' oral health in Canada is difficult because this population group is not homogeneous. For instance, when CDA conducted a public opinion survey of more than 1,000 people aged 55 and older in January 2006, 82% rated their own oral health as good to excellent. Although this is very encouraging news, the oral care needs of the younger respondents will most likely change as they age. The ambulatory, newly retired person has very different dental requirements from the frail or institutionalized senior.

Seniors entering long-term care facilities are frequently in poor health, not very mobile and are often unable to perform even basic personal care, including oral care. Compounding the problem is the fact that some dentists, nursing staff or care providers do not feel comfortable or do not have the skills, background or experience to provide oral care to these frail seniors. What will happen to patients with a mouth full of restorative dentistry, implants and assorted sophisticated dentistry when the restorations start breaking down, causing pain and suffering,

and the patients are without access to continuing quality care?

Those within the profession recognize an urgency for action and our organizations must take the lead. Coming up with solutions to such a complex and multi-faceted issue will require creative thinking. In 2005, CDA helped organize a 1-day forum on seniors' oral health, bringing together representatives from the profession to identify key issues related to seniors' oral health care in Canada and to develop a shared vision for the future.

Participants identified a number of short- and long-term activities that can make the vision a reality. As a follow-up to the forum, the CDA Board of Directors recently struck a National Seniors Task Force with CDA's Committee on Clinical and Scientific Affairs to take the lead on prioritizing and overseeing the implementation of recommendations.

Eliminating barriers to access to care is also crucial in trying to ensure that older Canadians receive appropriate oral care. While many seniors in Canada have enjoyed third-party involvement with their dental care, upon retirement they are finding that these benefits are either substantially reduced or even eliminated.

CDA has been lobbying the federal government for some time about the development of a new type of medical savings plan. Known as a Personal Wellness Investment Fund, this structure would allow a person to transfer registered retirement savings into a special tax-free holding account upon retirement. The funds could be spent on medical expenses, including dentistry, that are not covered under the Canada Health Act. While this concept is still in its infancy, we think it could have great potential.

As practitioners, we have spent our careers working with dedication and diligence to restore, repair, support and retain dental capability for our patients. We don't want to see these efforts come to naught because of inadequate or unavailable care at the age when our patients are most vulnerable. CDA will continue to mobilize the profession and voice our collective message about the need to provide Canadians with oral health care for a lifetime.

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