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Is Competition Good for Care?

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This issue of *JCDA* is a special edition published in conjunction with the Canadian Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (CAOMS). One goal of working closely with our CAOMS colleagues is to bring you up-to-date information on topics that are of everyday importance to general practitioners, for example post-extraction nerve injuries, surgical emphysema and what to do when your patient is a victim of family violence.

Another goal is to provide updates on clinical topic areas that may appear distant from the day-to-day activities of most general practitioners but which our specialist colleagues handle on a regular basis. In this light, I am thinking of the articles on facial trauma, supraorbital fractures, and fat embolism following iliac crest bone harvesting. These articles not only provide a glimpse into our surgical colleagues' activities, they also highlight the advancing boundaries of our profession's scope of practice.

I am sure that our specialist colleagues can recount stories about contested scope of practice issues with colleagues in other professions.

Such friction surrounding traditional scopes of practice, and the reactions to them, are becoming more commonplace in the modern climate for the health professions. Over the past couple of decades, it seems that we have been moving away from discrete and distinct scopes of practice to a situation where overlapping boundaries are the norm. Government policy makers have encouraged this change in the hope that the evolving regulatory environment would promote competition and innovation in the delivery of health services. Some stated goals of these developments are to increase patient choice, reduce health care costs and ensure adequate quality of care.

Canada's Commissioner of Competition has an interest in these policy goals and is currently

paying attention to our sector. She singled out dental hygiene services for attention in a speech delivered on May 15, 2006, in Toronto. According to the Commissioner, countries like Canada have no choice but to inject competition and innovation into the marketplace, especially in the increasingly important services sector, if we are to thrive in the climate of globalization in the 21st century.

In the speech, the Commissioner states, “To get the most out of our creative people we must ensure that their skills are deployed in marketplaces that are competitive — which are unburdened by ineffective, inefficient and unnecessary regulations which may even impede professionals from making full use of their qualifications.” While acknowledging that people at the Competition Bureau may be pro-competition, the Commissioner denies that they are competition zealots who “argue blindly for competition at the expense of all other goals.”

This is encouraging news indeed, because it leads me to believe that the Bureau should be open to the valid arguments that the dental profession can make in the areas of patient safety, cost-effectiveness, efficiency of oral care delivery, collaborative care, and levels of practitioner competence.

I am concerned that competition authorities around the world are advocating direct access to dental hygiene services seemingly without appropriate consultation with the dental profession. My primary concern stems from the fact that “dental hygiene services” is a term that can be misinterpreted. Furthermore, I am also concerned that dental hygiene groups would like to see hygienists assuming the role of primary oral health care provider, trying to persuade policy makers that oral health care is not a sufficiently demanding science requiring leadership from highly trained and competent dentists for case management.

I have met a number of dentists who had previously been dental hygienists and a common refrain is: “I didn't know what I didn't know when I was a hygienist.” In the headlong rush to modernity through innovation and competition, I ask for further consultation to examine the appropriate level of knowledge required for coordinating the type of oral health care that Canadians deserve.

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