



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

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## Remembering What's Really Important

November is a time of sober reflection in Canada. While poppies worn in the lead up to Remembrance Day act as temporary emblems of our appreciation, events in Afghanistan are constant reminders of the sacrifices that countless brave men and women have made, and continue to make, for our country. Over 1.5 million Canadians have served in uniform since the beginning of World War I, with over 100,000 making the ultimate sacrifice.

Since 1915, our colleagues in the Canadian Forces Dental Services have never been far behind the front lines. By creating the Canadian Army Dental Corps (as it was known then), the government of the day officially recognized that oral health is vital to general health. The overall state of the population's oral health was surely quite different in that era, but then as now, a toothache can easily cost lives in a combat zone.

The military cemeteries in northern France are graphic reminders of how many lives have been lost in conflict. One of the most striking days I have ever spent was during a visit to Vimy Ridge and the battlefields of the Somme in the spring of 2004. Because of my origins, I found the monument to the Ulster Regiment and to the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel particularly moving. I know that the memory of the Somme is etched in the collective consciousness of many Newfoundlanders. Yet despite past hardships, the people in this province are among the most hospitable in Canada.

This hospitality was demonstrated in August when CDA held its annual convention in St. John's in conjunction with the Newfoundland & Labrador Dental Association. Many shop windows bore signs stating "The City of St. John's welcomes the Canadian Dental Association," which made us feel genuinely welcome and important in a traditional sort of way.

Traditional clinical dentistry was front and centre in the convention's scientific program

spearheaded by Dr. Dan Price of St. John's. While many convention programs focus on the newest technologies and therapies, Dr. Price and his colleagues believed firmly that all patients presenting to all dentists deserve excellent routine care. As such, they designed a scientific program that enabled clinicians to receive updates from a range of experts on how to manage everyday clinical problems.

One memorable session examined the current state and future of public dental care programs. This panel discussion attracted practitioners from both the private and public sectors, filling the room to capacity. Our profession's public sector can sometimes be forgotten, evident in this sector receiving less than 6% of all dental care spending in Canada. Yet public health is where many of our profession's unsung heroes fight their own battles, with diminishing resources, trying to combat widespread oral disease.

Expensive therapies for wealthy Canadians might garner most of the attention of the dental press, but I believe that we must never forget our social responsibility to highlight the causes and consequences of the burden of oral disease, especially among the vulnerable segments of our society. Oral disease is often but a manifestation of a host of social problems experienced by our most vulnerable citizens.

Just days before the convention, the government of Newfoundland & Labrador announced an injection of several million dollars into their children's dental treatment program. I'll wager that this money will go some distance in providing better access to dental treatment for many needy children in the province. However, we are still unable to accurately define the burden of oral disease and its consequences in Canada as a whole.

Thankfully, this situation should soon be rectified with the fieldwork commencing in 2007 for the first major national oral health survey in over 30 years. JCDA will keep you informed about the Canadian Health Measures Survey as it progresses. Appropriately, our colleagues in the Canadian Forces Dental Services will be conducting the oral examination component of this survey. They continue to contribute so much to our profession. My personal remembrances in November include a sincere thank you to these dedicated compatriots.

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