

Dr. Darryl Smith: Passion for Dentistry and the Environment

Practising dentistry 350 kilometres from the nearest major city is bound to give one a unique perspective on the Canadian dental profession. For CDA's new president Dr. Darryl Smith, his experience as a rural practitioner has reinforced the importance of providing oral health care for people with the greatest dental needs.

The path that led the Edmonton native to Valleyview, Alberta, a town of less than 2,000 people located in the northwest corner of the province, began when Dr. Smith was completing his dental degree at the University of Alberta. He accepted a bursary during his final 2 years, which dictated that he practise dentistry in northern Alberta for 2 years upon graduation. After practising for 1 year in High Prairie, Dr. Smith established a solo general practice in Valleyview, and has practised and lived in the area ever since.

The population base in the region consists of First Nations communities and people employed in the agricultural, forestry and petroleum industries. Many of Dr. Smith's patients have had limited or no access to dental care throughout their lives. "You quickly learn what the ravages of untreated dental disease are all about," he says. "You recognize that access to care is such an important issue, and as the only dentist in town, you are confronted with situations that normally would require the services of a specialist."

Active Involvement in Dentistry

Like many dentists, Dr. Smith's initial foray into organized dentistry began with his local dental society, the Peace River and District Dental Society. The society stretches across 2 provinces and had about 30 members at the time he joined. "With so few people, there was an understanding that everyone

had to pitch in and get involved from the get-go," he recalls. "There was a feeling that you can't just sit on the sidelines and watch events unfold."

This willingness to participate and take action led Dr. Smith to serve in several capacities with the Alberta Dental Association (now the Alberta Dental Association and College), beginning with the mediation committee. He was elected to the Board in 1991 and eventually rose through the ranks to the ADA presidency in 1996-97. His time with the provincial association emphasized the importance of establishing strong working relationships with those in dentistry, government, industry as well as the public, to help move the profession forward. For Dr. Smith, moving forward includes being willing to propose initiatives that may go against the grain. "My philosophy is to take the best of the past but with a forward vision, so as not to be afraid to challenge the status quo as one strives for consensus," he stresses.

Ultimately, Dr. Smith believes the direction forward for the profession will need to be supported by a renewed governance framework at CDA, with the Association playing a key role as a facilitator and consensus builder. "I would like to have some frank discussions, early on in my mandate, to determine the roles and responsibilities of all parties," he notes. "We need to achieve an understanding among all corporate members, which is that some groups may perform a particular task better than others. It will require strategic thinking to determine what groups are best positioned to achieve desired outcomes."

Dr. Smith is a firm believer that the profession can benefit from having equally strong national and provincial associations. "I feel that creating working partnerships and recognizing that there are programs best delivered nationally, and likewise provincially, is the only way forward," he says. "Collectively, we are a group of associations with a limited membership and limited resources, so we must have the best possible communications, dialogue and discussion mechanisms in place."





Dr. Darryl Smith and immediate past-president Dr. Wayne Halstrom at the President's Installation Dinner.

Total Treatment and Care

During his CDA presidency, Dr. Smith wants to present a vision to members of what the profession can achieve, if it remains united. "Dentistry is a relatively small group in the health care community so it will require a truly collective effort if the profession wants to remain the public's first choice for their oral health care needs."

Dr. Smith characterizes this as the 'dentistry brand'. "If we are truly a senior profession, then our brand must be about wellness, prevention, diagnosis and total treatment and care, not about having whiter teeth or a brighter smile," he continues. This idea of total treatment and care is influenced by his day-to-day encounters with his patients. "It makes no sense to me why many dentists no longer construct removable dentures or pick up a scaler to treat periodontal disease."

He believes that dentistry should not rest comfortably on its accomplishments, even though the current model of care has resulted in exceptional oral health for the majority of Canadians. "The access to care issue is one that will continue to drive change throughout all of health care in Canada and dentistry is no exception," says Dr. Smith. "The profession must find solutions to serve rural, First Nations and disadvantaged patient groups from a human resources perspective or we risk having inferior solutions imposed upon us."

In the eyes of Dr. Smith, the demise of dental public health programs and similar preventive services in Canada has been a troubling development over the past 2 decades. "Canada must renew its support of oral public health measures," he urges.

"If anyone thinks dental disease has been beaten, then I would suggest coming to rural Canada. Certainly diet plays a large role but the lack of community-based preventive programs has also had huge consequences on oral health."

Commitment to the Community

Dr. Smith has always had a strong sense of responsibility, instilled by his parents, about the need to give back to both your profession and your community. For almost 30 years now, he has served the Valleyview community not only as a dentist but as a volunteer in a wide range of areas.

While at the University of Alberta, Dr. Smith contemplated pursuing a career in forestry or fisheries management. This passionate interest and love of the outdoors was part of what attracted him to northern Alberta. He currently participates in numerous committees that address the management of fisheries, wildlife, forestry and parks. He dedicates many hours working with youth to allow them to enjoy the outdoors and has taught the "Conservation and Hunter Education Program" in the area for over 20 years.

Dr. Smith shares his fondness for nature with his family. He enjoys spending his free time at his farm and in other outdoor recreational pursuits with his wife Becky and daughters Leah and Meghan. Both daughters have also chosen careers in the health field and plan to return to work in a rural community after graduation.

"When you practise dentistry in a rural community, your actions can reverberate around the area," explains Dr. Smith. "When something happens in the office, whether good or bad, everyone in the area will know about it. Yet this can have its benefits, as the community respects the efforts you put forth as a health care provider on its behalf."

Dr. Smith acknowledges that finding new dentists to practise in rural communities is a challenge, but he remains grateful about how it has enriched his life and career. "I was able to establish a practice quickly, it's good from a family standpoint and you really have a chance to get to know your neighbours," he concludes. "It's a great lifestyle and you truly are part of the fabric of the community."

It is clear that the Valleyview community continues to benefit from Dr. Smith's dedication and sense of responsibility as a practitioner. He is sure to bring this same level of commitment to his role as CDA president. ♦

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