



Dr. Susan Sutherland

## Seniors' Oral Health Unites the Profession

An overarching theme that unifies the efforts of all Canadian dental professionals and their supporting organizations is the promotion of optimal oral health as a critical component of overall health for Canadians of all ages. Providing high-quality oral health care to our aging population, particularly the frail, medically complex and dependent elderly, is presenting an increasing challenge.

Seniors comprise the fastest growing segment of our society. As a result of successful preventive measures and excellent dental care enjoyed by many Canadians, seniors are retaining their natural teeth for much longer than ever before. The elderly no longer accept losing teeth as an inevitable consequence of aging. However, with physical decline and increasing frailty, the maintenance of good oral health is considerably more challenging both for the individual and for their dentist.

Many seniors face a number of obstacles in accessing dental care, including financial barriers for those on limited income with no dental insurance or other third-party funding; geographic barriers for the homebound, especially in rural areas; and physical barriers in some dental offices. The greatest challenge for the dental profession lies in providing adequate care for the most vulnerable seniors, those whose physical and cognitive impairments render them dependent on caregivers for routine activities of daily living, including oral hygiene. For the institutionalized elderly, a lack of public policy and guidelines related to standards for the provision of oral health care, inadequate training and supervision of personal support workers and other long-term care staff, lack of proper facilities and remuneration for oral health care providers, and a shortage of providers with the expertise to offer care in these settings all contribute to the problem.

In 2005, CDA and its provincial partners came together for a national forum on seniors'

oral health care to identify the issues related to the complexities of seniors' oral health. Participants recognized the need for a national approach to adequately address the substantial barriers and profound disparities that comprise the problem. Building on the shared vision from this forum, the CDA Board of Directors tasked its Committee on Clinical and Scientific Affairs (CCSA) to follow up on the ideas generated at the summit. A task force was created, chaired by CCSA member Dr. Chris Wyatt and composed of members whose extensive academic and clinical backgrounds contributed both scientific rigour and practical clinical experience to the process.

The CCSA recently presented its *Report on Seniors' Oral Health Care* to CDA's Board of Directors. The report is both comprehensive and ambitious, requiring a strong commitment on many fronts, locally and nationally, to implement its recommendations. It highlights some of the innovative projects for seniors currently in place and the remarkable successes achieved to date across the country. One of the key roles CDA can play is to act as a repository for these projects and local accomplishments, making them known and available to others across the country. As stated in the report, there is a need to "harness the collective creative capacity and generate the synergies to move the seniors' oral health care agenda forward in a meaningful way."

As we plan for the future, it is important that CDA, along with its provincial partners, continues to examine issues of national importance that affect all dentists and transcend local or provincial mandates. For instance, the next major issue on CCSA's agenda is early childhood caries. This is another area where the clinical and academic expertise of our members from across the country can be brought together to create a unified and comprehensive national strategy with concrete recommendations.

The promotion of a culture of collaborative working relationships among CDA and the provincial members will enable the dental profession to address the important issues facing oral health today. A united dental profession working together has the ability to develop strong national platforms that can be adapted for local circumstances. In this way we can more effectively achieve our shared vision for the optimal oral health of Canadians.

*Susan Sutherland, DDS, MSc  
Chief of dentistry, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre  
Chair, CDA Committee on Clinical and Scientific Affairs*

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