



Dr. David Zaporinuk

Strengthening the Canadian Dental Profession

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During my time in organized dentistry with CDA and the British Columbia Dental Association, I have been involved in a variety of projects and programs all designed to help strengthen the Canadian dental profession. One issue of particular importance to me has been examining which external factors could be affecting the traditional status of the dentist as the leader of the oral health care team. It has become quite evident to me that regardless of where we practise, these factors are on the verge of producing fundamental changes to the profession across our entire country.

For several years now, I have been leading a joint task force mandated to research and analyze how dentists and the dental profession in Canada are perceived, and to determine the implications of these attitudes on the future success of our profession. The task force, composed of representatives from the provincial dental associations and CDA, enlisted the services of a globally recognized consulting firm to perform research within the profession, including interviews and focus groups in select regions of the country. The results of this research make it abundantly clear that the perception of the dental profession is changing and that the role dentists play in the delivery of oral health services in Canada is being challenged.

The underlying issues influencing these changes have the potential to erode both the exclusive scope of practice of dentists and the notion that dentists are the leaders of the oral health care team. Such shifts in leadership could affect the health of our patients, the viability of our dental practices and the development of future oral health regulations in all jurisdictions in Canada.

This emerging reality is complex and cannot be attributed to one particular issue. Rather, a combination of factors are challenging the dentist’s traditional role and significantly altering the professional landscape in which we practise. Yet as dentists we have the ability to determine our profession’s reputation by becoming more actively involved as leaders in our practices, in the profession and in the community.

For instance, dentists must be the first and most trusted point of contact on all issues related to oral health. More importantly, we must be seen as such by patients and policy-makers. We can achieve this by placing more emphasis on communicating with patients about the importance of the oral exam and making a stronger commitment to patient-centred care. Our ability to perform oral examinations helps distinguish dentists from other oral health care team members, yet this fact may not be completely understood by patients or policy-makers.

We can spend more time with our patients during the oral exam to explain why comprehensive care supervised by a dentist who has the ability to provide a full diagnosis is so critical to their oral health, and therefore, their overall health.

We should also try to resist external pressures, such as the influence of marketing from oral health care and cosmetic manufacturers, which may be persuading some of our colleagues to offer more cosmetic procedures at the expense of basic oral health care.

You will be hearing more about changing perceptions, and the challenges they are placing upon our profession, in the coming months. Your professional associations will continue to work on your behalf on this issue. We always welcome the participation of dentists on these important matters, and encourage you to become engaged and actively involved with your associations at the local, provincial and national levels.

We must all work together to solidify the traditional leadership role of the dentist in Canada. It is time for dentists to open up and play an active part in strengthening the future of our profession.

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CDA Board of Directors*