

President's Column

BEING EFFECTIVE AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS



Dr. John Diggins

Dentistry is such an engrossing profession it is easy to forget that decisions taken hundreds or thousands of miles away can have a profound effect on our professional lives. Such decisions can be taken by governments, business corporations or international organizations. The only way we can hope to influence these decisions is by speaking with one voice and by building long-term coalitions with like-minded associations.

CDA plays this role for Canadian dentistry on the national and international stages. I recently witnessed how effective our organization can be at the highest levels. In October, I was part of a small delegation to the annual meeting of the Fédération dentaire internationale (FDI) in Mexico City. And in November, I had the honour of representing CDA at hearings of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology and at hearings of the House of Commons Finance Committee.

In advance of the federal budget in February, the Commons Finance Committee has been hearing depositions from various groups across Canada. The main purpose of CDA's presentation was to

discuss issues that have a direct impact on our members, dentistry in general and the oral health of Canadians.

We made specific recommendations about funding tobacco control initiatives, creating more favourable conditions for adequate retirement income for Canadians, making tuition in professional schools more affordable, and creating a climate where more Canadians have dental plans through employment.

The final report of the Finance Committee incorporated key CDA recommendations. For example, the committee recommended that the government: combat youth smoking, raise RRSP limits in terms of maximum contributions and foreign content, and make every effort to enhance access to post-secondary education. This report represented an encouraging payoff for CDA's efforts.

With the explosion of electronic commerce, the Internet and database marketing, one area of major concern to Canadians is the privacy of their health information. Can you imagine a health facility selling "confidential" information to database marketers? It couldn't happen in Canada, you say.

Well, it is happening. In one recent case, a woman just diagnosed with cancer received a solicitation from a funeral home on returning home from hospital. In another case, a man who had consulted a sexual dysfunction clinic received mail advertising cures for impotence.

CDA takes this threat to the invasion of privacy very seriously — every dentist in Canada collects confidential health information on a daily basis. Because we have a special trust relationship with our patients, we feel a responsibility to press the federal government to ensure that the privacy of health information is stringently protected.

Bill C-6, the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act*, is currently under consideration in Ottawa. This bill has two aims: to facilitate electronic commerce and to protect the personal data collected by organizations conducting e-commerce.

On November 29, the CDA, along with the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian College of Family Physicians, appeared before the Senate

Committee that is considering this bill. Our organizations expressed strong concerns that the current bill could allow sensitive health information to be passed along to secondary users — without the informed consent of the patient. This practice is totally unacceptable to the dental and medical professions, and CDA will continue its efforts to protect the confidentiality of our patients' health information.

If Ottawa seems remote from daily dental practice, I'm sure you will ask what's the relevance of FDI. I had somewhat the same view until I attended this year's meeting in Mexico City.

Many of the professional issues CDA is dealing with are global in dimension and require international cooperation for successful management. FDI aims to speak as the authoritative international voice for our profession on issues such as the supervision of auxiliary dental workers, HIV/AIDS, dental mercury hygiene, illegal dental practice and improved access to oral health care.

All of these issues are as relevant in Kamloops as they are in Kuala Lumpur. We have a lot to offer to FDI, just as we have a lot to gain. Just a few years ago, CDA brought together an international panel of experts on the subject of amalgam. This international group lent great legitimacy to the CDA position on amalgam in the eyes of key decision makers in this country.

Other groups of dental workers are using statements by their international federations to lend legitimacy to their strategies. I believe there is a clear message for us in all of this. We have to be active players in all the political arenas that impact on dentistry. The future of our profession and the oral health of Canadians depend on our effectiveness in these forums.

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