

# Editorial

## VALUE IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Going through airport security takes longer these days, often long enough to listen in on the conversations of security agents. Recently, at Ottawa International Airport, I chanced upon a conversation about teeth and dental care. Agent #1 says: "Isn't the price of dental care very expensive?" "Of course," Agent #2 concurs. Agent #1 pipes back in that he recently had a toothache and saw a practitioner who informed him that a root canal treatment and a crown for a posterior tooth would cost him \$1,600.

The agent said he asked the dentist "How much to pull the tooth?" The dentist replied that the fee would be \$200. The agent proudly told the dentist to "pull" the tooth. The idea that many other teeth in 2 quadrants of the patient's mouth might be at risk as a result of this extraction did not seem to factor into his decision.

This is a snatch of conversation that is very familiar to every reader of this publication. Every day, you meet patients who are very conscious of the cost of dental care; they opt for services that are covered by their dental plan or else the lowest-cost treatment. Very often, you try to persuade these people that oral health is very important and that it is vital to take a long-term view, rather than opting for quick and cheap "solutions."

No doubt you convert some people to your view of the world. However, others seem impervious to your persuasive arguments. They look at you in disbelief and say to themselves: "You are getting all excited about this because *you are into teeth*." And of course we are, having gone through a rigorous training program and knowing all the pitfalls and consequences of poor oral health. We know what's best for people when it comes to oral health — or so we think.

The reality is that everyone has a different set of values and we all put a different value to particular services. You must respect your patients' values. Only by listening very carefully and understanding what motivates them will you be able to change the perspective of a tidy percentage of your patients. Often, you have to go with the flow and modify your treatment plan to match the patient's value system.

I see a parallel between dentist-patient interaction and the interaction between dental association and dentist. Both are service interactions, in which many of the benefits are intangible and long-term. The recipient of the service being provided will often look for a short-term payoff with what are perceived to be more "tangible" benefits.

In earlier times, there was no shortage of buyers; in the case of dental associations, the purchasers of services

were often "captive." This era is over (or soon will be). As in private practice where you have to demonstrate value to each patient, we in the association world have to demonstrate real value to members and potential members.

Associations run the risk of making a grave mistake if they don't consider very carefully the value systems of current and potential members. In an increasingly skeptical world, members must feel that they are getting more than expected from their associations or they will vote with their feet at the earliest opportunity.

This year, CDA surveyed individual dentists about their needs and wants from the Association. Clearly, Canadian dentists want a mix of tangible and intangible benefits that will help them be successful. Our organization is analyzing these preferences, and in conjunction with the provincial dental associations, we will be earnestly working towards meeting the needs of Canadian dentists in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

One-off surveys are a lame substitute for member engagement in defining the future of a professional association. There are enough bright minds among the dentists of Canada to ensure that we have the proper blend of associations and organizations providing services to ensure optimal oral health for Canadians, as well as a successful profession and successful individual practitioners. All are inextricably linked, according to my view of the world.

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