

President's Column

TO BE OR TO DO? THAT IS THE QUESTION



Dr. George Sweetnam

A recent opinion poll asked: “Is dentistry something you are or something you do?” The intent of the question was to see if the respondent saw himself/herself as a professional or as someone who just did the job from 9 to 5.

Unfortunately, the results were skewed by age group. Dentistry was perceived as “just a job” by younger dentists. Although the results were not unexpected, I read them with disappointment. Not so much for the response, but for what I feel these individuals will miss, if they carry forward that perception through the length of their careers.

In the November-December 2001 edition of CDA's *Communiqué* newsletter, I was quoted as saying: “(The Canadian Dental Association's) 100th anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on what made the profession strong — ethics, integrity, compe-

tence and professionalism. We must weave those characteristics into our frameworks for the next 100 years as well.”

I don't doubt for a moment that the younger practitioners have the first 3 characteristics covered, but I would like to discuss professionalism in a context of lifestyle that some of the respondents are missing.

One of the rewards I have found in leadership roles was the opportunity to present awards at various functions and to meet the distinguished recipients. I have learned a great deal from these presentations, not the least of which was that both the individuals themselves and the profession benefit from the effort that brings professional and community recognition.

The common trait I have observed among these individuals is a focused interest and the happiness and satisfaction that it brings them. While appreciating the recognition, recipients are usually genuinely surprised by the attention they have attracted. Most feel that the privilege of working with like-minded individuals and benefiting from self-development were rewards in themselves — more than compensating them for their efforts.

Growing up in a small community, I recall how the townspeople turned to professionals for leadership on school, hospital and library boards. Perhaps it was because there was less post-secondary education in those days and formal education was more respected. Yet nowadays, I think the public still wants this kind of leadership from trusted professionals.

Competition, debt load, practice management and family responsibilities are the burdens of younger practitioners. However, solutions are found in living the life of a professional (in the old sense of the word). I would suggest that, with more involvement

in the community and less in state-of-the-art practice management, you will arrive at the same place with less stress.

Being involved in an area of interest can be much like a hobby. It can act as a stress reliever and, indeed, be downright invigorating, as you see your efforts growing to fruition. Outside interests are also good for your mental health and productivity, compensating for routine office procedures.

Working in the community can give you a different perspective on your practice and indirectly provide you with market research. As you gain the respect of your fellow volunteers, they will consult with you openly and frankly. As their respect grows, they will seek you out professionally and refer others to you as well.

I urge younger practitioners who see dentistry as just a job to seek out older dentists, especially those with a twinkle in their eye and a history of community activity, who truly love their work. I think these older professionals will convey the inner satisfaction that comes from belonging to a profession that brings relief from pain and makes people well again.

A final point, and it's a therapeutic one — when you become more involved in the affairs of your community, you are brought into contact with people whose situations are far more difficult than yours, and this can make your office worries seem much less burdensome. I guarantee that, through your taking on a greater role in the community, you will appreciate your profession and what it is doing for you all the more.

*George Sweetnam, DDS
president@cda-adc.ca*