

Editorial

REDEFINING THE PRACTICE OF DENTISTRY



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As part of my work for CDA on the future of our profession, I wrote possible scenarios for Canadian dentistry. These are works of complete fiction and I am always afraid that the groups I present these scenarios to will think I consumed a banned substance.

Happily, many colleagues to whom I have presented the scenarios, while not believing that any of them will come true in their entirety, seem to agree that some elements of each could become reality by 2020. Of course, the objective of the exercise is not to pretend to be able to predict the future; it is to help the profession's leadership position our profession in a changing environment.

In one scenario, I envision a category of worker, which I call a dental therapist, becoming the gatekeeper to dental services for an appreciable section of the Canadian population. The dental therapist would be akin to a nurse practitioner, able to diagnose oral conditions, perform preventive therapies and refer patients to dentists for

surgical treatments. The dental therapist would work as an independent practitioner in a corporate-owned ambulatory health clinic, much like what is being developed by Boots, a major pharmacy chain in the United Kingdom (<http://www.wellbeing.com/bootsdental/index.jsp>).

Two recent developments in Alberta have direct relevance to this scenario. On December 31, a new Health Professions Act was proclaimed there. The Act describes 28 professions, including dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants, denturists and dental technologists. A really interesting development in this new Act is that diagnosis is not a so-called "restricted activity." Thus, diagnosing oral conditions is no longer the sole purview of dentistry and medicine.

The roles of a dental hygienist include the ability to "assess, diagnose and treat oral health conditions through the provision of therapeutic, educational and preventive dental hygiene procedures to promote wellness." A denturist can "assess, diagnose and treat persons missing some or all of their natural teeth." Dentists "evaluate, diagnose and treat surgically or non-surgically diseases, disorders and conditions of the mouth (...) the maxillofacial area and (...) the adjacent and associated structures of the head and neck."

Historically, scopes of practice were well defined, with legal restrictions against straying onto the "turf" of another profession, and there were very few regulated professions. Now, there is a plethora of regulated professions and a term that recently crept into the literature on health regulation is "overlapping scopes of practice." I interpret this to mean that governments have decided to create competition for patients between the different occupational groups, in the hope that

the cost of health services will decrease.

It is difficult to envisage that a hygienist or denturist with a right to diagnose oral conditions would require a treatment prescription from a dentist to initiate treatment within his or her scope of practice. How extensive will those scopes of practice become? This is difficult to predict. Denturists and hygienists in Ontario are seeking the right to order radiographs, and presumably diagnose oral conditions with their aid.

In light of concepts that have entered dentistry in recent years such as "periodontal medicine" and the "medical management of caries" (see this month's Clinical Abstracts), who will provide the medical management of oral conditions and in what delivery systems? I predict that this is an area of practice scope overlap where there will be a great deal of action in the years ahead. One can only hope that the best interests of the public will always be kept in mind.

The other development of tremendous importance to dentists is the February 26 decision in the Alberta Court of Appeal that only dentists can own dental practices and that all members of a professional corporation operating a dental office must be dentists. In its decision, the court held that the practice of dentistry includes the business aspects of running a dental office. You can consult the full text of the judgment on the Internet at <http://www.albertacourts.ab.ca/jdb/monthca.htm> (February 2002, document 25).

Certainly, these developments could have major effects on the future of our profession.

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