

# Editorial

## HEALTH PROMOTION IS OUR BUSINESS



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Linguists say that language is the garment of thought. By this, they mean that words frame how we think. Conversely, we can communicate specific meaning to others through carefully chosen words. Two examples of what I consider to be carefully chosen language relating to the Canadian dental sector cannot, in my opinion, be accepted without qualification.

Recently, in dental hygiene publications, I have seen the assertion that hygienists are “specialists” in health promotion, while dentists tend to focus on the surgical aspects of oral care. I interpret this use of language to presume a rather narrow and education-based definition of health promotion. Equally, I believe that we mustn't allow ourselves to be depicted as surgeons alone, as we enter the era of the medical management of caries and periodontal disease.

I have also recently heard dental associations such as CDA described, in regulatory circles, as advocacy organizations for dentists — the insinuation being that dental regulatory authorities have the monopoly on looking out for the public interest and that associations have no real business in this domain. This flies in the face of the words in the CDA mission statement, which proclaim that the organization is preoccupied as much with achieving optimal oral health for all as it is with advancing the dental profession.

If we allow our professional world to be framed by both of these descriptive phrases, we become in our own minds, and in the eyes of the public and society's decision-makers, a narrowly focused self-interest group. This does not reflect my experience of our profession or my concept of its future. For me, the interests of a successful profession never diverge far, or for long, from the public interest.

As leaders of the oral health team, we are in a position to provide a range of public services, from guidance on preventing disease to providing sophisticated rehabilitative treatments. We must take these responsibilities very seriously and never leave gaps that could be filled by others.

National Oral Health Month, with its theme *Oral health — good for life*, gives us an opportunity to pause and ask how we can be health promoters in the broadest sense. Two elements require brief comment. CDA now celebrates “oral” rather than “dental” health month to reflect the fact that our profession is not focused solely on teeth, but on the whole orofacial complex. This change is in keeping with the modern broad definition of oral health passed by CDA's Board of Governors in March 2001 (see page 218).

Secondly, the theme reflects the profession's preoccupation with the

growing body of evidence that oral health and general health are intimately linked. The U.S. Surgeon General has stated that a person cannot be healthy without good oral health. In keeping with that statement, the World Health Organization has stated that our responsibility is to promote general health through improved oral health.

We can promote health through strategies designed to impact on its principal determinants: human biology, lifestyle, accessible and cost-effective health services, and the physical, political and socioeconomic environment. Through these strategies, we help our fellow citizens take control of their own health as much as possible.

Modern health promotion is not simply comprised of chairside education or poster-and-pamphlet campaigns. It includes an intensely political set of activities where individual professionals and their representative organizations show leadership and take responsibility to advance the public good. We can all do our bit to provide accessible, cost-effective oral health care. While delegating certain activities, we have a major impact on lifestyle choices that affect oral and general health. Further, the true professional is not afraid to become politically involved at the local level to advance the public's health.

Once we become health promoters to the core, we will realize that we don't really need an oral health month. All our professional activities and many of our everyday private interactions promote health. So here's to individual dentists and our associations as health promoters!

John O'Keefe  
1-800-267-6354, ext. 2297  
jokeefe@cda-adc.ca