

President's Column

GETTING GOVERNMENT'S EAR IS AN ONGOING EFFORT



Dr. Tom Breneman

National Oral Health Month (NOHM) means a great deal to organized dentistry. Planning starts 11½ months in advance, as we adopt a theme, secure sponsorship, write articles, prepare advertisements, and ensure our spokespersons have the most current information to disseminate to the public and to government decision-makers. This coordinated effort results in extensive media coverage that reinforces our message of preventive dental care — with the dentist as the primary care provider. CDA's annual Day on the Hill event at the end of April is timed to take maximum advantage of the awareness generated by NOHM.

Our government relations strategy and the opportunity to place dentistry's message on the radar screens of Canada's top-level decision-makers is not just a once-a-year event, though. We continually update and fine-tune our messages, as well as the materials we leave behind with Cabinet ministers

and members of Parliament. The messaging evolves from CDA's Strategic Plan and is updated to reflect decisions taken by the Board and Executive Council. Messages are further refined by CDA staff, with input from the Government Relations Steering Committee. This year, the issues fell into 3 broad categories — health, financial and professional.

The health issues include the oral health of First Nations people, the National Oral Health Strategy and tobacco control. Professional issues relate to the licensing of foreign-trained professionals, tuition fees and the serious concerns facing our dental faculties. Financial issues include cost-recovery by Health Canada's Medical Devices Bureau, bank mergers and the taxation of dental plan premiums. Our messaging is factual and succinct. It includes policy recommendations and is delivered throughout the year in formal and informal settings. Although delivering a consistent message on the issues is important, the critical part of the strategy is to establish and maintain positive relationships with politicians and their senior-level advisors.

This relationship building begins as our staff and consultants update us on the views of those 30 or so MPs whom we want to visit. This approach enables us to better understand their points of view, and better prepare our presentations and responses to their questions and concerns. As always, our big-picture outlook is aimed at issues and ideas that will positively affect the oral health care needs of Canadians.

Our most recent meeting with Federal Health Minister Anne McLellan went very well indeed. She seems to understand dentists' concerns about the oral health of First Nations people and the impediments that the current Non-Insured Health Benefits dental plan places on us as providers of care. We also discussed the proposed

electronic health record to ensure that dentistry is consulted early in the development process, because of its ongoing leadership role in electronic claim transmission.

Federal Immigration Minister Denis Coderre complimented our profession on its current system of upgrading professionals via qualifying programs from non-accredited dental faculties. At the same time, Mr. Coderre advised us that the status quo will not be adequate in a few years' time. In effect, we will need to devise a system to evaluate foreign-trained professionals, either by extended reciprocal accreditation agreements or through individualized gap education programs to ensure full competencies for practise in Canada.

When informed that funds to our teaching faculties had already been cut back to the point where we are close to a crisis situation, Mr. Coderre said that funding could be discussed once we prepared a comprehensive and unified proposal on the accreditation of foreign dentists. "Handshake before handout" was the way he put it. We will definitely hear much more about this issue in the months ahead.

To conclude, I would say that CDA members should be pleased (and indeed proud) of the government relations work that the Association is doing on their behalf. This is a wonderful time to be a member of the dental profession, as there are many on Parliament Hill who knew of our issues and complimented dentistry on an excellent effort in communicating its message in a very transparent and positive way. Government relations are an ongoing investment that will keep on paying dividends, but only so long as we continue to convey quality information to Canada's financial and health care policy-makers.

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