

Editorial

REVITALIZING OUR COMMUNITY OF INTEREST



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Professional associations fulfill 3 main purposes: advocating the interests of members, providing useful information to members and other key people, and building a sense of community.

The vitality of our professional community is very important to me, as one who is tasked with paving some important avenues of communication between CDA and Canadian dentists. I have been systematically looking at means of widening these avenues and removing potholes to improve communication between CDA and the dentists of Canada.

Two strategies that strike me as having potential for better linking CDA to the individual dentist hinge on making our publications more pertinent, timely and interesting, and building relationships with interested individuals in every local dental society. Of course, the effectiveness of the latter strategy depends on the vitality of these societies.

I understand that real engagement in local societies is declining across the board. While I have heard that one eastern city's dental society has really been turned around with young people coming out in great numbers, the more common refrain is that "the same old faces turn up at all the meetings" and that "the young dentists aren't coming out, let alone getting involved in committees." One dental society in a major urban centre is said to be "virtually defunct."

This lack of involvement is not just a Canadian phenomenon. Membership in the American Medical Association (AMA) hovers just above 30%. The high number of medical specialists who feel a primary adherence to their own specialist association may explain a good deal of the decline in the AMA's membership. The American Dental Association (ADA) experienced a decline in membership from about 75% in the early 1990s to an estimated 70% by 2000. This despite the tripartite membership formula whereby you are either a member of the local, state and national organization, or you are outside the fold.

Being outside the fold seems to be a growing North American phenomenon, according to Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard University. In his book entitled *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, Prof. Putnam describes the decline of engagement of Americans in all sorts of organizations, from bowling leagues, to political parties and professional associations. One chart from this fascinating book stands out.

It plots the percentage membership of the 8 largest national professional associations in the U.S. through the 20th century. Membership levels grew between 1945 and 1970, but have been dropping ever since. In response to this trend, the ADA has instituted a

grassroots membership renewal initiative to reconnect the organization and its members. By all accounts, this campaign is paying dividends with promising early results, showing that there is probably nothing to beat direct human contact for creating a sense of really belonging to a community of interest.

Perhaps, some pointers to kick-starting our local dental societies and getting CDA better connected to individual dentists may come in Prof. Putnam's new book, *Better Together*, coming out this month. While *Bowling Alone* highlighted the problems and causes of declining social involvement, pointing to generational change and the privatization of leisure as a result of TV and the Internet, the new book is meant to suggest solutions.

Before I can add *Better Together* to my reading pile, my efforts are devoted primarily to enhancing community through better CDA publications. This month, we introduce our new *Clinical Showcase* feature, which, along with the *Point of Care*, *Clinical Abstracts*, *Diagnostic Challenge* and *New Products* sections, is designed to make *JCDA* more timely, interesting and pertinent for the busy dental practitioner.

Our goal is to answer the questions that Canadian dentists are asking. We hope to give you good quality information and keep you up-to-date on matters of concern to you as a professional. Clinical dentistry is the one thing we all have in common. The more you become involved in developing *JCDA*, either by writing or by suggesting to me the questions you would like us to answer, the more this journal of record can be a showcase for our profession.

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