

Editorial

REACHING OUT AND BROADENING MINDS



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Dr. Robert Kriegel, author of the book *Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers*, suggests that companies need to kill their “sacred cow,” pre-conceived notions in order to innovate and thrive in an increasingly competitive marketplace. I believe we will need to use similarly radical thinking to address the pressing issue of ensuring access to adequate oral health care for all Canadians.

While most of our compatriots have access to high-quality care, many with low incomes, increasing numbers of seniors and some in isolated rural areas have difficulty accessing care. I believe that the dental profession has a responsibility to show leadership on this issue and needs to work with different groups, in different ways, to bring about progress. In this vein, representatives from various organizations came together at the University of Toronto last May, with the strong encourage-

ment of Dean David Mock, to grapple with this thorny problem.

A summary of the main discussions and recommendations that came out of the Toronto symposium is published in this edition of *JCDA*. Ruth Armstrong's article is one of a series of reports from the symposium that we are publishing. While you may find some of the ideas expressed by the participants to be outside your comfort zone, I contend that we need to celebrate the fact that these people came together to examine what I think is currently our profession's biggest political issue. The creativity shown by symposium participants may point the way towards solutions, some which deviate from mainstream thinking.

I am not alone in according so much importance to the access issue. I recently interviewed Dr. Bob Brandjord, president-elect of the American Dental Association (ADA). When I asked him to identify the major political issues facing ADA, he unhesitatingly said that providing access to oral health care for underserved Americans, many residing in rural areas, is at the top of the list. His assertion is borne out in a freely available white paper on access to care produced by the ADA in October 2004.

Dr. Brandjord spoke with great pride of the rural clinical outreach program run by the faculty of dentistry at his alma mater, the University of Minnesota. This program, which has run successfully for many years, brings dental students off campus to provide care in underserved areas of the state. A major factor in the success of the program, according to Dr. Brandjord, has been a flourishing partnership between the dental school and the dental profession in Minnesota.

On a recent visit to Edmonton, I learned that Associate Dean Ken Zakariasen of the University of Alberta faculty of medicine and dentistry was

formerly part of the management team of the University of Minnesota dental outreach program. He has brought his enthusiasm for rural outreach to his new job and he spoke excitedly about plans for developing the University of Alberta dental student rural outreach program, which I had the chance to visit last year.

My observations of the Alberta program were very favourable and I believe it is a model that may be worth developing further and emulating elsewhere. While it currently provides a solution to a very small part of the rural access problem, the program could benefit other underserved rural communities if it were expanded. Dental students need to practise their clinical skills and rural outreach clinics provide no shortage of interesting patients.

Patients in rural areas need care and there is anecdotal information about the increasing difficulties in convincing graduating dentists to purchase a practice or become associates in many parts of rural Canada. Exposing more students to the rural lifestyle has the potential to attract them away from major cities once they graduate. Fortunately, the Alberta dental outreach program is housed in a faculty keen to place an even greater emphasis on developing a wide range of rural health education and service initiatives.

Surely the time is right for interested parties from different sectors to work together to expand programs like this. Having more students involved in the community throughout the school year may allow more Canadian students to be admitted to enhanced “dental schools without walls.” I didn't see too many sacred cows during my time in Alberta.

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