

Dr. Deborah Stymiest Leads CDA Into a New Era

A break from tradition can often have a positive effect on an individual or an organization. CDA is no exception. The Association, which is currently in a time of transition, is re-examining its core functions and activities. Who better to lead the Association during this period of change than the first female president in CDA's 106-year history — Dr. Deborah Stymiest of Fredericton, New Brunswick.

Dr. Stymiest was raised in Sydney Mines on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island, a unique part of the country with a strong sense of community and family ties. The region itself played a part in leading her toward dentistry. "Growing up in a small coal-mining town, I saw a need for more dentists and physicians in the community," she recalls. "I always knew that I wanted to help people and become involved in the health professions."

Discouragement from a narrow-minded guidance counsellor would not dissuade Dr. Stymiest from pursuing her goal of becoming a dentist. "This was one of my earliest exposures to gender bias, but I consider myself fortunate that I had a wonderful father who quickly put me back on the right path," she says. Dr. Stymiest's father began working in the coal mines of Cape Breton in his teenage years, but eventually rose to the rank of mine manager. She credits his example and encouragement as giving her the confidence to achieve her career goals.

Dr. Stymiest went on to study biology at Mount Allison University and obtained her dental degree from Dalhousie University in 1983. Two years later, she moved to Fredericton to establish her own general practice and has lived in the provincial capital ever since.

A strong desire to contribute to the dental profession was the impetus for Dr. Stymiest's initial involvement with her regional and provincial dental societies.

She soon discovered a common thread among her colleagues within organized dentistry — a passion for dentistry and a solid grounding in what is right and wrong for the profession as a whole. "Organized dentistry is really about providing a meeting place, a coming together of professionals with common concerns, goals and aspirations for the profession," says Dr. Stymiest.

She went on to serve as president of the New Brunswick Dental Society in 1997, the same year she joined CDA's Board of Governors. Her tenure at CDA has included serving as the Atlantic Canada representative on the Executive Council in 2002 and working on several task forces and committees, including student affairs, ethics and government relations. She tells *JCDA* that with each new role, she gained valuable experience and her commitment to the profession increased.

The Challenge of Transition

CDA is in the midst of a period of change and Dr. Stymiest's term as CDA president will centre on successfully managing this transition. "One of my priorities will be to help CDA focus on its core activities, recognizing its strengths and channelling its energy to allow the organization to deliver measurable outcomes in key areas," she notes.

She firmly believes that this review process will ultimately strengthen CDA's position as the national voice for all Canadian dentists. "The Association must always do its research and consult with the other members of the extended Canadian dental family before we speak on matters that affect us all," she explains. "Dentistry needs a national voice and we must be confident that our words reflect the sentiment and position of the profession as accurately as possible.

"More than ever, it is relationships with stakeholders that will be crucial to CDA's success," she continues. "We must share our resources and work together to strengthen CDA and, ultimately, the profession." To work collaboratively with the many stakeholders in the dental family will require some fresh thinking. "We must combine our efforts to





The Stymiest family in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. From left: daughters Laura and Kate, Dr. Stymiest and husband Bev.

create new efficiencies and avoid duplication. This will require a renewed era of sharing and helping each other as we focus on common goals.”

Looking outward at the position of dentistry within Canadian society, Dr. Stymiest recognizes that the greatest challenges to the profession may not be new but they touch every dentist. “Access to care, early childhood caries, and reinforcing the primacy of the dentist as the leader of the oral health care team — the profession must continue to address these issues with a unified vision,” she states.

During her career, Dr. Stymiest has seen dentistry make great strides in the areas of prevention, research and education. She has borne witness to dentistry’s evolving role in the well-being of Canadians, a role that acknowledges the intrinsic relationship between oral health and general health. “It is wonderful to see an increased public awareness about the mouth being the window to the body and that it reflects our overall health,” says Dr. Stymiest. What she is most proud of, however, is the profession’s progress in improving infection control and ensuring the safety of patients through universal infection control guidelines. “Patients can feel secure that the profession has their health and safety as a priority,” notes Dr. Stymiest.

A Fresh Perspective

Dr. Stymiest is aware that people may focus on her gender as she assumes the mantle of CDA president. While she takes the responsibility of

being the first woman to hold this position very seriously, she does not want this to define her presidency. “Above all, I would like to be recognized as a good listener during my time as president, someone who hears the concerns of all dentists — male and female alike.”

At Dalhousie, Dr. Stymiest’s graduating class consisted of 4 women and 20 men. Yet a look at photographs from recent graduations or white coat ceremonies at Canadian dental schools signals a dramatic change in demographics. “Perhaps I can bring a new perspective on certain issues and a better understanding of the gender shift that we are experiencing in our profession,” she says. “I look forward to a future where many more women will step forward and become involved as leaders at the national level of Canadian dentistry,” adds Dr. Stymiest.

Back in Fredericton, Dr. Stymiest says that she thrives on being busy and is enjoying the exciting pace of her life. An avid reader, she also likes to spend her free time dabbling in photography, art and the culinary arts. Dr. Stymiest is grateful that a career in dentistry has enabled her to be actively involved in the lives of her 2 daughters, now teenagers. “I believe that my daughters truly are my greatest accomplishment. I am very proud of who they are, what they do and of the wonderful young women they have become.”

Encouragement and support from her husband and colleagues continues to reinforce her decision to remain involved in organized dentistry. “After 25 years in the profession, I’ve come to realize that our lives both professionally and personally are shaped by others,” she explains. “As CDA president, I know that I will be standing on a strong foundation built upon the work of those who have come before me.

“Being surrounded by dedicated and caring people, I am confident that I can only be successful in my role as president,” she concludes. ✦

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