

President's Column

PROMOTING THE ORAL HEALTH OF CANADIANS



Dr. John Diggins

April is Dental Health Month. This annual event reminds us of our profession's public commitment to the promotion of oral health among Canadians. Of course, the event itself has evolved over the years. The first mention of a specific time set aside for the promotion of oral health dates back to the CDA Transactions of 1957. That year, the governing body of CDA adopted the following motion: "Therefore be it resolved that the Canadian Dental Association take steps to set up a National Dental Health Week or Day(s)." After a hesitating start, Dental Health Week became Dental Health Month in the late 1970s.

Although CDA no longer plays a central role in Dental Health Month, the Association continues to be at the forefront in promoting the oral health of Canadians. This role is a fundamental part of CDA's mission statement. To understand just how far we have come over the past 40 years, it is instructive to

read the CDA brief to the Royal Commission on Health Services in 1962. This was the commission that recommended setting up the present medical care system which is so dear to Canadians.

Back in the early 1960s, the oral health problems of Canadians seemed overwhelming, with no relief in sight. At that time, oral disease was rampant. There was a great shortage of dental personnel and only one-third of the population visited the dentist in any given year. There was no pre-paid dental insurance. Fluoridation benefitted only a small minority of the population. In the face of this immense challenge, CDA recommended to the federal government that priority be placed on the prevention of oral diseases through water fluoridation, education of the public, dental research and expanding manpower.

Canada now boasts a level of oral health and a standard of oral health care that rank with the very best in the world. Our profession can be justifiably proud of these achievements; however, we should not take them for granted. The current state of affairs came about through the concerted efforts of many committed dental professionals. I have no doubt that future challenges will require similar collective efforts by the dentists of Canada.

The leadership displayed by the profession at that time has largely paid off. Oral health and dental practice have changed dramatically in the past four decades. As you know, we face problems of a different nature today, with calls from some vocal elements of society to remove important treatment and preventive modalities from our armamentarium. Other occupational groups are attempting to bend the ears of governments with the aim of convincing them that they are qualified to be the primary oral care providers for Canadians. There is a growing elderly population requiring extensive care yet having limited means of paying for that care.

Yesterday's problems are different from today's, and surely tomorrow will

throw up a whole different set of issues for organized dentistry to deal with. No matter what the nature of the problems facing us, however, a constant principle is that we can only be effective if we stand together in the interests of society and our profession.

Our position in society is derived from the trust and esteem conferred on us by the public. This trust is based on our individual and collective capacity to communicate well with our patients, and in return, listen carefully to their concerns. From a time back in the '60s when public awareness and interest in oral health seemed not to be very widespread, today's public is hungry for information about how to maintain good oral health and what exciting new treatments exist to repair the damage caused by oral disease. Our profession's role in delivering information has largely changed because of this revolution. Currently, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that the public has access to user-friendly science-based information.

This year, for Dental Health Month, CDA has placed advertisements in some popular national magazines such as *Reader's Digest*, *Maclean's* and *Chatelaine*. These ads extol the importance of oral health and the central role played by dentists in promoting oral health. We have also prepared information packages for use by community newspapers and other media outlets across the country. Our CDA Web site features a new children's program to celebrate the event.

The means of communication may have changed with time, but the principle underlying our messages is unwavering. We are consistent in our commitment to providing Canadians with science-based quality information that will help them to keep their oral health "Good for Life."

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