

President's Column

BEING SENSITIVE TO OUR ENVIRONMENT



Dr. John Diggins

Living in British Columbia, I am reminded every day how important it is for us to respect and take care of our physical environment. As I look across Burrard Inlet at Grouse Mountain, I am constantly amazed at the beautiful surroundings here in Vancouver. As many Canadians are aware, "Beautiful British Columbia" as our car licence plates indicate, is home to a strong environmentalist movement and its citizens in general are highly conscious of the fragility of our physical environment.

The recent tragic events in Walkerton, where at least 14 people have died as a result of drinking water contaminated with a virulent strain of E. Coli, remind us how delicate the balance is between us and our physical environment. The media coverage, the public disquiet and the inevitable legal proceedings in the aftermath of Walkerton serve us notice that society is increasingly intolerant of those whose actions place others in danger through environmental pollution.

In a previous column, I wrote that the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) was considering taking action to devise Canada-wide standards for dealing with mercury pollution. Among potential sources of mercury pollution, dental offices were targeted for reductions in the amount of amalgam waste that finds its way into the waste water system. In that column, I welcomed Canada-wide standards, cautioned that we needed more information about the magnitude of the amalgam waste issue, and hoped that amalgam's place in the armamentarium of dentists would not be questioned. I also offered the services of CDA as a resource to the ministers as they worked to devise and implement a new standard for dealing with amalgam waste.

The CCME, composed of the environment ministers from the provinces, territories and federal government, met in Quebec City in early June and agreed in principle to a Canada-wide standard for the disposal of amalgam waste. This standard is to come into effect when the ministers meet again in November. You can read the contents of the standard on the CCME Web site (<http://www.ccme.ca>).

Between now and 2005, dentists will have to reduce the amount of amalgam waste discharged into the environment by 95%. This reduction is to be brought about on a voluntary basis and should be based on the best management practices for dealing with amalgam waste. This means that we will have to install amalgam separators and arrange for proper disposal of the waste that builds up in these separators.

The ministers recognize that local initiatives to deal with amalgam waste are already being implemented. For example, regional action has already taken place in Montreal, Toronto and Victoria. The ministers also recognize that it would be a nightmare for dentists across the country if there was an uncoordinated patchwork of regulations. Hence the need for a Canada-wide standard.

CDA's role in implementing the Canada-wide standard is to cooperate with Environment Canada as part of a working committee to discuss the adoption of best practices for dealing with amalgam waste. The outcome of this process will be a memorandum of understanding between Environment Canada and CDA, which should be in place by the end of 2000. One of the first things our representatives will be impressing on Environment Canada officials will be the importance of clearly establishing baseline levels against which the 95% reduction is to be measured.

I believe there are a number of significant conclusions to be drawn from the dental profession's dealing with government on this issue. First, we are recognized as having an important input in devising standards that will work well for both the public and the profession. Second, government recognizes the profession as being sensitive to the environment. This is consistent with the generally high esteem in which dentists are viewed by the Canadian public. Third, it is good that the profession has a unified position on how to deal with issues as important as amalgam waste. CDA is the organization that is best positioned to coordinate the development of such unified positions. We are also best equipped to articulate these positions to the federal government and the Canadian people.

Working on this issue has really highlighted the importance of CDA's dual mandate of serving the profession and the public. Some would cynically hold that one organization cannot serve both its own interests and the public at the same time. I disagree. I believe that CDA's record on the waste amalgam issue, among others, shows that we are a vital resource for the Canadian dental profession and Canadians when it comes to taking positions to optimize the oral health of our fellow citizens.

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