

Editorial

TOWARDS A VIRTUAL DENTAL SCHOOL



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Many dentists I know have mixed memories of their years in dental school, but most will probably admit that the health of our profession is linked closely to the health of our dental schools.

University-based education was formally recognized as one of the pillars of the North American dental profession with the Gies Report in 1926. The scientific basis of dentistry that is generated by research, largely conducted in universities and relayed to dental students, ranks with self-regulation and a code of ethics as building blocks of the profession as we know it.

Yet the dental education sector is undergoing some serious pressures these days; pressures which should be of concern to every dentist because of their potential impact on the future of our profession. As public sector insti-

tutions everywhere are retrenched, dental schools are experiencing severe budgetary restraints. Faculty members have to "do more with less" as the modern mantra of economic efficiency goes.

Other trends do not give cause for optimism. It is difficult to recruit faculty members, especially for the clinical specialties. A number of dental schools have been merged with medical schools either for economic or philosophical reasons. Tuition has risen in many schools, making access to a dental education possible only for well-to-do students. It is difficult to find patients to help dental students learn clinical skills, particularly in certain disciplines. As a result, clinics in dental schools are finding it increasingly hard to stay afloat financially.

Dental schools have always been torn between the often-conflicting goals of research, education and service. Different stakeholders evaluate the performance of schools by how they meet these goals. The parent universities put most emphasis on the research output, while students, practitioners and governments probably place a different emphasis on this. Despite all these difficulties there is something interesting brewing in the field of dental education at a global level.

Recently, I represented CDA at a "Global Congress on Dental Education." I was among 220 delegates from 48 countries that spent over 4 days discussing various aspects of the future of dental education around the world. There were 7 other Canadian delegates, including 5 deans. Attendees were divided into 18 working groups in 5 theme areas to discuss all facets of undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing dental education.

The idea for this global congress arose from a movement in the European Union, where there is mobil-

ity of professionals, to standardize the quality of dental education in member countries. With the impending expansion of the Union to include countries of Central and Eastern Europe, there is a need to ensure that professionals from these countries have an education equivalent to that obtained in Northern and Western Europe. If the EU is a template for economic unions in other parts of the world, and there is the likelihood of a Union of the Americas, then the standard of dental education throughout this hemisphere becomes a very important political issue for us.

I believe another driver behind the global congress is the potential impact of new technologies on the delivery of professional education. One of the themes of the congress was to explore how far we might move towards creating the "Virtual Dental School." While this concept might sound fanciful, it addresses the possibility of delivering education at sites remote from traditional dental school settings, by means of the Internet or other channels.

To sample developments in distance dental education, I invite you to consult the Virtual Interactive Periodontology Web site of Professor Rolf Attstrom in Malmö, Sweden (http://periodont.od.mah.se/perio_videonet). Professor Attstrom described to me how his graduate students discuss clinical cases with colleagues in Seattle, Oslo and Berne live over the Internet. The dental school without walls is virtually a reality. Professor Attstrom welcomes feedback from Canadian dentists about his Web site and his initiatives in the field of distance dental education.

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