

Editorial

EVERY SILVER LINING HAS A CLOUD



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Over the past couple of months I have had occasion to meet a number of our federal public representatives. For the most part these politicians are very interested in knowing what issues are of concern to dentists. Two in particular stand out in my mind because they were so effusive in their praise of dentists and dentistry.

One said that dentists are a group that MPs like to meet. This is because we have an image of being hard-working ethical people who do a lot of good through our professional work and our community involvement.

Another MP told me that dentists have much to be proud of, given that the quality of dental care in Canada is so high and that oral health is so good here in comparison to most other parts of the world. Why don't dentists boast about their achievements more, this MP asked? We don't hear you

blowing your own horn enough, he continued.

The response might be that the culture of the dental profession doesn't lend itself to flashy displays of self-congratulation. I speculate that dentists in general take a quiet pride in their own achievement and that of the profession, all the while striving to improve their own work and satisfy the oral health needs of Canadians. No matter how good we are, we can always be better in our delivery of oral health care, and the average dentist always wants to do better.

Whenever I speak to students about the delivery of health care, I invariably state the belief that there is no perfect delivery system. For example, under capitation there is an incentive to undertreat patients, while the private practice fee-for-service system doesn't allow access to all potential patients.

This problem with our delivery system was neatly highlighted in a doctoral thesis that recently came across my desk. Written by Dr. Christophe Bedos of Montreal, the research looks at factors that are influential in driving demand for and utilization of dental care in Quebec.

The results of the inquiry show that approximately 75% of Quebec adults in the 30- to 44-year age bracket consult the dentist on a preventive basis. This is good news indeed. The cloud on the horizon is that people further down the socio-economic ladder don't embrace this preventive behaviour, often visiting the dentist only when symptoms arise. Even then, they tend to put off that visit for an undue length of time. It is a concern for the dental profession that a sizable minority in our society experiences such pain and suffering. Poverty is a dental issue!

It is going to take a lot of bright minds to work on solutions to the

issue raised in this thesis. The dental profession can't solve this problem on its own. We will need to work with government, public, non-profit and private sector partners to tighten the mesh in the Canadian dental safety net. Our challenge is to keep the best parts of the current delivery system, while ensuring that all Canadians have access to necessary preventive oral health care.

The oral health needs of an aging population will present another challenge to the profession. There is a large cohort of baby boomers that enjoy the benefits of good dental plans and will continue to do so until they retire from the workforce. Upon retirement, these people, who can hope to live for many more years, will for the most part lose their dental plans. As inevitably happens, the high-quality dental work these people have received throughout their working lives will need extensive and expensive maintenance. It will be very traumatic for them if they have to face the loss of teeth because of restricted dental care options. If Mr. Tim Brown and Dr. Wayne Raborn are correct (see p. 373 of this issue), there may also be a penury of dentists to attend to these needs.

All these issues, coupled with the increasingly recognized importance of oral health to general health, raise a provocative question for me at a time when the future of health care in Canada is being examined. Is dentistry an "essential" medical service, or is there a better adjective to describe its importance to Canadians?

John O'Keefe
1-800-267-6354, ext. 2297
jokeefe@cda-adc.ca