

President's Column

SUSTAINING OUR PROFESSION



Dr. Burton Conrod

Recognition as a profession requires dentistry to demonstrate a distinct body of knowledge and a mechanism to impart this knowledge to those who would become members of our profession. I think we are approaching a crossroads where serious thought should be given to how we intend to sustain our profession as a "renewable resource" for the Canadian public. As a practicing general dentist, I have very real concerns regarding the future of dental education in this country.

Recruitment and retention of academic faculty is perhaps the major problem faced by our dental schools. I have not seen any definitive Canadian studies on the subject, but anecdotal evidence gathered during my travels indicates that demand for dental educators far exceeds the current supply.

A comprehensive report published in 1999 by the American Association of

Dental Schools looks at the demand for more dentists in the U.S. and at the ability of the educational system to supply new graduates as aging baby boomer dentists retire and a greying population makes increased demands for oral health care. Estimates indicate 300-400 funded faculty positions remain unfilled at the 55 American dental schools. These positions offer competition for Canadian schools recruiting staff. The report recognizes that no aspect of dental education is more critical to its future than adequate numbers of dedicated, well-qualified faculty.

Recruiting former practicing dentists out of retirement to become dental educators will not provide the framework needed to ensure vitality and viability in our dental faculties. Of course every school depends on experienced dentists to teach part-time, but the real problem lies in recruiting young dentists and new graduates who want to dedicate their careers to scholarly activities.

The first part of the problem may be money. It is quite common for dental students to graduate with an accumulated debt of over \$100,000. Taking a position on a university salary is not an option for someone who wants to pay down this debt and purchase a home and a car in the near future. The average starting salary for a full-time educator is far below what many could earn in a busy private practice environment. Also, students have been looking forward to getting out in practice where they can interact with patients and colleagues in the "real world." In short, we have a group of people who are not really aware of the benefits of careers in education and it would likely take more than financial terms to convince them to change course.

Practicing dentists, however, are one of the greatest recruitment forces for

dental schools. Perhaps it is time that we began to discuss the positive aspects of a career in dental education with our young patients. Research and academia might be an attractive alternative for those who would not otherwise have considered dentistry. We should refer prospective students to faculty members who would act as role models in the same way that we usually mentor patients who want to enter dental school. Research is a necessary function of academics. It helps define our profession and sets universities apart from community colleges. Canadian research is recognized internationally and often undervalued at home. We should give more thought to encouraging young people to pursue a future in dental research.

Hopefully, the integration of the academic and research communities into CDA's new governance system will help focus our profession on educational issues. Strategic forum discussions could sensitize all stakeholders in oral health care to problems such as recruiting and retaining faculty, recruiting patients for school clinics, ensuring curricula are competency-based and providing adequate practice management training. Perhaps CDA could help by facilitating a study on the needs of Canadian dental faculties so that organized dentistry and the government could be of more help in future.

Every dentist in Canada is indebted to their dental faculty for providing them with the education to become productive members of an esteemed health care profession. We must all do our part to sustain dental education.

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