

Editorial

A PROFESSION ON THE MOVE



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Are there enough dentists in Canada? The answer to that question depends on your perspective. If you are a heavily indebted young dentist starting a practice in a large urban area, you may say that there are too many. If, on the other hand, you are a low-income patient in a rural area having difficulty in accessing care, you might have a totally different opinion.

Even if there is a range of answers to the opening question, it is a truism that in all countries there is a maldistribution of health professionals. According to Milton Roemer's classic work in the field, *National Health Systems of the World*, the richest urban areas invariably have the greatest numbers of professionals and the lower income rural areas have chronic shortages. Headlines in Canadian newspapers trumpet this "new" phenomenon, particularly in respect to physicians and nurses.

The Romanow Report on the future of health care in Canada highlighted impending shortages of health care workers and discussed strategies

for solving the problem. However, the Report went on to caution rich countries against poaching health professionals from developing countries with the promise of higher earnings. Such developing countries can ill-afford to lose valuable human resources, often educated at a high cost to the state.

However, the migration of professionals will continue as before and will most likely accelerate as baby boomers retire in western developed countries. According to Roemer, physicians from India have historically migrated in large numbers, particularly to the U.S., the U.K. and Canada. And what of the migration of Indian dentists to the west? In a recent conversation with a Toronto-based dentist, I learned about an Indo-Canadian dental study club with approximately 300 names in their expanding database. A significant number of these practitioners received their dental education in India, notably from schools in the Bombay area and in a little place called Manipal (www.manipal.edu).

I had occasion to visit Manipal in early September, while I was attending the FDI Congress. When some faculty members of the dental school saw that I was a speaker at the Congress, they invited me to participate in a workshop on dental journalism. They held this workshop to gain insights into getting their articles published in the international peer-reviewed literature. They want to remove any barriers to disseminating the knowledge they generate.

What I saw in Manipal impressed me greatly. First, I was surprised to find that there were over 200 registrants for the workshop, many of whom were young postgraduate students and interns. In speaking to these bright young people, I was taken by their desire to educate and improve themselves. These people demonstrated that they are already knowledgeable and want to learn more. They are also very

proud of attending dental school in Manipal, a "city of white coats". On a quick tour, the infrastructure of the dental school seemed fine, but it was the faculty members and students who really made this a special place.

Among the foreign undergraduates at the Manipal dental school, there are a number of Canadians, many of whom will presumably return to Canada. The mobility of Manipal dental graduates may soon be augmented if their current bid to gain accreditation status with the Dental Board of California (DBC) is successful. Since 1998, the DBC has been mandated by the state government to evaluate individual foreign dental schools and to accept their graduates if they meet certain criteria (see page 7 at http://www.dbc.ca.gov/pdf/newsletters/2002_10.pdf). To my knowledge, one Mexican dental school has already received accreditation approval by the DBC. Surely more will follow.

I expect this trend to increase in importance as baby boomer dentists retire in the years ahead. If you look around the world, the migration of dentists from developing to developed countries is a continuing phenomenon. While Canada has an exemplary means of educating and licensing dentists, perhaps we can learn more about the evaluation of foreign-trained dentists and dental schools from other jurisdictions like California, New Zealand and the U.K. On my recent travels, I heard of U.K. organizations actively recruiting dentists from a Baltic country that has recently joined the European Union, where professional mobility is relatively easy. The issue of professional mobility is not going away.

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