



Dr. Jack Cottrell

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Political Action and Dentistry

My experience in municipal politics as a ward councillor during the 1980s taught me many lessons. Most were quite practical, such as listening to the concerns of my constituents and championing causes on their behalf. It also showed me the importance of getting involved and being passionate about the issues that have the greatest impact on the people you represent.

CDA has been presenting a strong unified voice on behalf of dentists across the country to the federal government for several years. The CDA presidency grants me the opportunity to share the concerns and experiences of member dentists across Canada directly with political leaders. The goal is to work toward finding practical solutions to ensure the advancement of the public's oral health and the profession of dentistry as a whole.

National associations do not exist in a vacuum. Political, economic and social forces are always changing, which can challenge some of the fundamental values that our profession holds sacred.

Such forces currently at work include the influence of third-party payers encroaching on the primacy of the dentist-patient relationship in the development of a treatment plan. Government cutbacks have hurt Canadian educational institutions and our profession due to inadequate funding and an increasing student debt load. There is also an increasing gap between the affluent and poorer segments of the population as a result of various government restrictions on the provision of public social programs.

As an association, we can simply stand by and wait for developments to occur that will shape the future of dentistry or we can be an active player, influencing the outcomes. CDA chooses the latter option, seizing the opportunity to lead

change and create our future rather than enduring outcomes that will be created by others.

As an individual dentist, you can also choose to get directly involved in the political process. While you may not consider your dental colleagues to be political types, the influence of dentists in parliaments around the globe is raising the profile of the profession. The U.S. Congress includes 3 dentists, the U.K. House of Commons and House of Lords have 3 dentists amongst their ranks while the governing party in Quebec includes a cabinet minister and junior minister from our profession.

This spring, CDA established a Political Action Committee, a new mechanism for advancing the issues of dentistry in Canada at the grassroots level. We assembled a select group of receptive and knowledgeable dentists who have agreed to meet their federal member of Parliament to build well-informed, manageable relationships.

Such grassroots campaigns have a greater potential for success in these unpredictable political times of a minority Parliament. MPs are more eager to meet their constituents and are willing to support issues that already have some political traction.

Dentistry is well positioned in this respect. There is a broad range of federal government departments whose portfolios encompass matters important to dentistry. CDA works in tandem with influential lobby coalitions to present our members' views on such issues as tuition, taxation, retirement savings and foreign credential assessment.

These issues have no borders and no simple solutions, but demand debate between dentists and leadership from all parts of the country. CDA's government relations department is already planning its annual Days on the Hill meetings for November, where we share information and form working relationships with targeted federal parliamentarians.

It takes the combined efforts of associations and individuals from across Canada to put forth strong arguments about the issues that impact on dentistry. By continuing to educate and influence elected officials and civil servants about the priorities and positions of dentistry, we can continue to have a positive influence on the profession and the oral health of all Canadians.

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