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Think Locally and Act Globally

A colleague who practises in another country contacted me recently with some questions about the delivery of oral health care in Canada. He wanted to know if there was any documented evidence about the effect of independent denturist and hygiene practice on the quality or price of care in this country.

It seems the Competition Bureau in his country is recommending independent practice for these 2 occupations and is holding up Canada as a shining example of how improvements to the delivery of oral health care can be brought about through liberalization of regulations governing health professions.

While I wasn't able to provide my colleague with the evidence that he sought, I found the timing and nature of his enquiry quite apropos. Just days before, I discovered a new report from the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with recommendations that were strikingly similar to those of the Competition Bureau referenced above.

The OECD (www.oecd.org) provides information, statistics and analyses relating to social and economic issues of importance to its 30 member countries. It also makes recommendations promoting common rules for countries as they adapt to globalization.

Within the context of promoting harmonization of systems in an era of globalization, the report is particularly significant. *Enhancing Beneficial Competition in the Health Professions* is the first report that the OECD Competition Committee has produced about the health professions. If the OECD is making recommendations about introducing more competition into health care, I'll wager that we will hear more about this subject from governments in the years ahead.

The report recognizes the importance of regulation of the health professions, acknowledging

that the web of rules governing these occupations serves to protect the public from potential harm caused by charlatans and unqualified providers. While these rules can be viewed as "anti-competitive" in nature, they are designed to ensure the provision of high-quality health care. The report highlights the need to strike the right balance between restricting competition and assuring quality.

In one of its arguments, the report claims that the rules constraining competition may be particularly restrictive in health care domains within the non-governmental sector. The oral health care sector is featured prominently throughout the document, with the authors choosing this sector as a prime example of what they term "over-regulation." Where the report speaks of the restriction of "para-professional" activities, the oral health care sector is the first example cited.

Many of the points that surface in the OECD report echo arguments raised in a 2004 Federal Trade Commission and U.S. Department of Justice report entitled *Improving Health Care: A Dose of Competition*. This document argues against the health care sector being considered a "special case" and therefore exempt from the anti-trust laws that apply to other business sectors. It also seeks a balance between regulation and competition that ensures the best outcomes in terms of cost restraint, quality assurance and broad access to care.

What lessons should we take from these 2 reports? I believe there will be an internationally coordinated effort by emerging occupations to use anti-competition arguments to challenge the position of the senior professions. The oral health care sector is ripe for such actions because it is conducted primarily within the non-governmental sector.

Using new arguments, the dental profession needs to coordinate its activities on a global level to advocate with organizations like OECD, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. These organizations, creating the framework for globalization, are increasingly influential in setting health care policy in member countries. While the regulation of our sector is implemented provincially, the policy climate is moulded globally.

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