



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Dentists and Seniors: A Healthy Partnership

Federal Minister of Health Tony Clement reminds us that June is Seniors' Month in this special edition of *JCDA* devoted to seniors' oral health care (p. 369). This edition showcases our profession's concern for the oral health of the fastest growing segment of the population and reinforces the message that oral health issues continue to affect people's lives as they age. As dentists, we can play a very important role in helping to improve the comfort and well-being of older Canadians.

The issue of quality of life of the most vulnerable in our society was highlighted for me in a recent encounter. While visiting an optician's office, I had a conversation with a gentleman well over 70 years old. I could see from his facial expression and slumped posture that he wasn't very happy. After some small talk, he put his head in his hands and started to cry.

His wife of over 50 years had died the week before and he hadn't gotten over her death. Apologizing for his tears, he said that he had visited her every day in hospital for the last 3 months of her life. It was understandable that he was still coping with his loss and I wondered if he would ever recover.

This poignant conversation reminded me of a presentation by a colleague that I had heard years before. Speaking about oral health care for seniors, Dr. Mary Kudrac characterized the euphemistically termed "golden years" as, in fact, a time of loss: loss of home, family, friends, independence, income, self-esteem, and very often, physical and mental capacity.

Whenever I see a frail or vulnerable older person, this concept of loss comes to mind. While in past times the loss of teeth invariably accompanied the aging process, this is no longer the case. The fact that a significantly larger population of seniors are retaining their teeth, even though they have often lost many other aspects

of their lives that contribute to overall happiness and well-being, makes seniors' oral health and oral health care so important for our profession today.

Because of this, I have worked very closely with *JCDA* associate editor Dr. Mary McNally to assemble the articles by leading authors that appear in this special issue. Drs. Ron Ettinger, Jane Chalmers and Michael Wiseman provide insights into appropriate clinical care for older persons. Dr. Anna Alian and colleagues introduce a computer-aided means of assessing oral disease risk in older adults.

British Columbians feature prominently in this edition. Dr. Michael MacEntee outlines the policy challenges facing the profession and other stakeholders with an interest in seniors' oral health. The challenges are legion, but Dr. Chris Wyatt provides an encouraging account of the development and initial outcomes of a comprehensive dental program for adults residing in long-term care facilities in the Vancouver area. This program is featured, along with 2 others, to give a flavour of how both private and public sectors are addressing the oral care of seniors across Canada.

Two opinion pieces raise important senior-related issues. Colleagues from the British Columbia Cancer Agency urge dentists to screen for oral cancer. Seniors' health advocate Mr. Phil Hughes of Nova Scotia articulates the patient perspective on oral health care, calling for greater government involvement in payment for care.

It strikes me that health advocates like Mr. Hughes and Mrs. Mary Cooley (a former member of the National Advisory Council on Aging who is featured with Dr. Mary McNally on our cover) are natural partners for our profession in highlighting solutions to government and other parties interested in oral health care for seniors. It will be vital, however, that we present a single, clear message about appropriate and affordable oral care that will keep even our most vulnerable seniors comfortable and capable of enjoying life's possibilities.

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

“Dentists can play a very important role in helping to improve the comfort and well-being of older Canadians.”