

President's Column

A PREVENTIVE APPROACH TO DENTAL AMALGAM WASTE



Dr. George Sweetnam

In his introductory remarks at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Dental Amalgam Waste, the Hon. David Anderson, Minister of the Environment, noted that dentistry had always been a profession known for promoting prevention and that, once again, we were adopting a preventive approach in how we handled dental amalgam waste. This was especially gratifying to hear, since it was a personal observation that didn't appear in Minister Anderson's prepared text.

Dr. Benoit Soucy, CDA's director of membership and professional services, deserves a lot of credit for his hard work in preparing the MOU. He was ably assisted by the Association's government relations department.

I personally reviewed 8 drafts; each new draft was a significant improvement over the previous one. Improvements included exemptions for non-amalgam-using specialists' offices and an acknowledgment that all the

actions required by the standard are introduced on the basis of the Precautionary Principle, and not because there is any indication that current practices in dentistry are harmful to the environment.

To understand the reason for CDA's involvement, we have to look back at what the federal government originally had in mind. The Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) set out to harmonize several agreements on the environment across the country. CCME's Mercury Canada-Wide Standard Development Committee proposed that a small number of sectors be addressed at the outset — base metal smelting, electrical power generation and waste incineration. Three products were selected — fluorescent light bulbs, sewage sludge and dental amalgam.

So we now have Canada-Wide Standards written for these products, aimed at reducing the release of mercury into the environment through life cycle management.

An important point has to be made here. It does not matter how much mercury is released from dental amalgam waste, nor where or when or if. It is the fact that dental amalgam *contains* mercury that qualifies it for implementation of Canada-Wide Standards.

Committing the profession to installing amalgam separators was a decision that was not taken lightly. Unless a satisfactory solution were found, dentistry could lose its exemption in the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA). This would have meant stringent reporting requirements — tracking all pollutants released from individual dental offices and preparing pollution prevention plans. The paperwork would have been staggering.

In this context, the voluntary installation of ISO-approved dental amalgam separators sounded like a pretty good alternative. Dentistry would not have to deal with complex

regulations and valuable staff time would not be diverted to preparing reports.

Other wins can be recorded as well. As a self-governing profession, we are seen to be acting responsibly in addressing environmental concerns. Arguing over scientific accuracy is a no-win public relations situation. We must be seen to be proactive.

The federal government views our proactive stance very favorably. It has earned Canadian dentistry the support of Environment Canada in promoting this standard to municipalities, which now have an alternative to enacting bylaws and policing the disposal of dental amalgam waste within their boundaries.

As initially conceived, the rules would be uniform for all municipalities. However, due to delays in signing the MOU, 3 cities chose to pass complicated bylaws that will be burdensome to administer and expensive to police and enforce.

After the MOU signing, Minister Anderson said that you can slap laws onto environmental concerns but, unless you gain the cooperation of those directly involved in the issue, policing is a futile effort.

We have talked the talk. Now it's time to walk the walk. I did some shopping for my office and found that there are 3 types of separators — filter, centrifugal and sedimentation. I favour the latter because it is more maintenance-free. Because I have a dry vac system, I will need some minor plumbing alterations. Yet the separator will be cheaper than I expected.

I am moving forward on this and hope that you will too. As I tell the media — when it comes to environmental concerns, dentists have families too. We all want a clean environment for them and for future generations.

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