

# Editorial

## WORKING TOWARDS A COMMON GOAL



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

We are blessed to live in this country, known throughout the world for its prosperity, civility and fairness. Millions of people have flocked to these shores in the knowledge that opportunity is boundless in Canada if you are prepared to pull your weight. For me, the cornerstone of the success of this country is that “outsiders” are made to feel welcome.

Drawing on the national analogy, I also believe that a hallmark of a successful profession is that it makes a place in all its activities for the minority groups within its fold. These groups often play a role, far greater than their numbers would suggest, in developing the profession and bringing new ideas to our political forums. A healthy democratic profession welcomes the energy generated by differing, yet enriching, viewpoints.

While most Canadian dentists are in private practice, others follow alternative career paths, notably in educa-

tion, research and public health. These sectors aren't the most lucrative, yet they are crucial to educating the next generation of dentists, moving forward the knowledge base that is fundamental to our professional status, promoting health by means of collective programs, and facilitating access to care for the most vulnerable in our society.

The American Dental Association's *Future of Dentistry* report, published in 2001, devoted a great deal of space to the education, research and public health sectors. This surely underlines the great importance of these smaller segments to the health of our profession. It is probably fair to say that the public health sector has been viewed by many in the profession as being a distant cousin that most don't associate with too much, rather than a fully integrated member of the dental family.

To help counteract such a view, this edition of *JCDA* has been produced in conjunction with the Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry to showcase work being done in that field. Certainly, from the viewpoint of organized dentistry, the types of issues addressed in the public health sector are vitally important.

I have witnessed many discussions at CDA about access to care for vulnerable groups, promoting oral health through society-wide programs and advocating environmental changes, such as tobacco control and adequate pensions for seniors. These initiatives have spurred me to describe CDA as a health-promoting organization — one that speaks to society's decision-makers on behalf of our profession about means of promoting general health through improved oral health.

I firmly believe that dentistry is knowledge work, not simply technical work, and that we must promote health every day as individual dentists

and through our collective organizations. I am also fascinated by how we use language to describe the world and how others may have a totally different vocabulary to describe the same phenomena. As a case in point, I have heard some colleagues describing hygienists as people “who scrape teeth.” Yet when I listen to the hygiene leadership speaking, I hear the language of health promotion, public health and wellness.

This is the very discourse that is used by society's decision-makers who are interested in the same goals. I believe that our profession must speak this language clearly and sincerely, so that key decision-makers will listen to us about oral health matters. We can learn this language and all its subtleties from our public health colleagues.

In this issue, you will read about diagnostic codes in dentistry; dentists' knowledge, attitudes and practices in relation to preventing oral cancer; the impact of dental insurance on the dental needs of older adults; and the possibility of educating dental students in community settings. All of these are issues of great concern to organized dentistry.

Rounding out the issue, we introduce a new practical, hands-on section called *Point of Care*. The goal of this section is to answer everyday clinical questions in the most concise and efficient manner possible. I invite you to send me clinical questions that we can answer in future editions. By dealing with public health issues and practical clinical matters, *JCDA* hopes to lead the profession to the common goal of helping Canadians achieve optimal oral health.

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