

Editorial

ROMANOW: A REPORT WITHOUT TEETH?



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The Romanow report was published in November with great fanfare. Media outlets devoted acres of newsprint and hours of airtime to the 392-page report. The main headline grabbers have been proponents of more privatization of health services and the provinces that don't want any federal strings attached to transfer payments for health care.

You may well ask where dentistry and oral health fit into the future of Canada's health care system, on the evidence of the workings of the Romanow Commission and its *Building on Values* report. A key word search of the final report and of the earlier submissions of a host of organizations to the commission yielded very few mentions of words such as "oral," "dental," "dentist" or "dental hygienist." In fact, the only submissions that I found which mentioned our sector at all were those that came in from the CDA, the Canadian Dental

Hygienists Association, the Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry and the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Dental Directors Working Group.

In the report, there are few explicit mentions of the services dentists provide, except to describe them as being essentially paid for in the private sector. According to one statistic, fees paid to dental care providers in 1999 amounted to \$6.8 billion, with 94% being paid for by patients themselves or through employer-sponsored dental plans. Another interesting statistic is that, while there was a 9% rise in the number of dentists in Canada between 1991 and 2000, there was a 42% rise in the number of hygienists during the same period. Hygienists are the fastest-growing group of health care workers in Canada, yet we can't seem to get enough of them!

Because of federal government involvement in First Nations health matters, a whole chapter of *Building on Values* is devoted to that topic. Expenditures on dental care in this program went from \$84.4 million in 1991-92 to \$123.3 million in 1995-96, and shrunk back to \$109.8 million in 2000-01. Interestingly, the expenditures on pharmaceuticals in this program more than doubled, from \$104.4 million to \$228.9 million during the same period.

In my estimation, the real potential impact on dentistry is contained in chapters where we are not mentioned explicitly. Certain initiatives will have an impact on all health professionals, if they come to pass. I think primarily of the strong encouragement in the report for the development of the electronic health record, which will give providers and patients access to information when, where and how it is needed.

Also significant would be the establishment of a Health Council to oversee human resource planning for health professionals, among other

tasks. This body would select and monitor indicators of health status, which I hope would include some oral health indicators.

Further, new services are proposed to the publicly funded system, and what is considered an essential service will be reconsidered on the basis of changing needs. I believe that a dental program for seniors may show up on the political radar screen over the next decade, as baby boomers reach retirement age in large numbers.

An entire chapter of *Building on Values* is devoted to "Health Care and Globalization." The report recognizes that international trade agreements such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services could have a potentially huge impact on how care is delivered in Canada. Those who enjoy a good conspiracy theory see multinational for-profit health care corporations operating in Canada much sooner than we might imagine. These corporations might take an interest in oral health care.

Our message that oral health is an important component of general health is not reflected in the Romanow report, and that will disappoint many in our profession. It seems that we are like a choir singing to an empty church. We will need to keep reinforcing our message over time, until we draw a responsive audience. Maybe the next federal report on health services will have more bite, as it looks like the provinces may scuttle many aspects of this one.

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