

Editorial

TEAMING UP FOR DENTAL EDUCATION



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The health of dental schools is essential to the vitality of our profession. Without a solid footing in the university, the dental profession would be much diminished indeed. Yet, Canadian dental schools are facing great difficulties now and in the years ahead. Why?

A high proportion of current faculty members will retire in the next few years. While I hear conflicting stories about the ability of schools to recruit faculty members, many say that recruitment and retention are more difficult. Without properly credentialed faculty members, dental schools will be hampered in their mission to graduate new dentists and dental specialists.

Difficulties in the specialist area were highlighted for me last year when I attended a meeting organized by the Canadian Association of Orthodontists aimed at exploring solutions to the looming shortage of faculty members to teach in Canada's 5 graduate orthodontics programs.

The big concern among the orthodontists was that if there were insufficient faculty members, there would be insufficient capacity to train enough specialists to meet the treatment needs of Canadians.

In turn, there will be even fewer teachers for the next generation of graduate students — a worrying downward spiral. The orthodontists identified lack of money for attractive salaries for prospective faculty members as the overriding cause for the developing problem.

I was surprised at the modesty of the salary ranges of university-based orthodontists. From what I hear, this problem is mirrored across the clinical disciplines, making recruitment and retention of clinical specialists an uphill struggle.

Granted, salary levels aren't the primary motivator for many dedicated teachers in our dental schools, and private practitioners may argue that employment benefits such as paid vacation and pensions sweeten the deal for tenured academics. However, when compensation differentials between the university and the private office are really large, it is not hard to understand why young specialists might choose private practice over academe.

The debt load that today's dentist graduates with may be a further deterrent to even considering an academic career. Compound this debt with more acquired during specialty training and the allure of the 5-figure university salary dims even more. In tandem with the human resource problem, the shortage of other resources is keeping our deans awake at night.

It is very difficult to make a profit from dental school clinics and there is a shortage of suitable patients in certain disciplines. Research funding is difficult to come by and the physical plant of many Canadian schools is in serious need of upgrading. With so many woes

on the horizon, should we just roll over and give up?

We can all do much to ensure a healthy future for our schools and profession. Given that dental care is delivered primarily in the private sector, most of the solutions will have to come from the private sector — the profession itself and the dental industry.

CDA, with generous sponsorship from Procter & Gamble (Crest products), Dentsply, the Dentistry Canada Fund (DCF), Septodont and Sonicare, took a major step along the road to solutions by organizing a Dental Academic Summit last November. This meeting brought together the professional organizations with an interest in the future of dental education. You will be seeing the tangible outcomes of this "education summit" over the coming months.

CDA has stepped up advocacy with the federal government for better dental research and education funding. I believe DCF will soon unveil plans for a major fund-raising campaign to help young practitioners along the training pathway to an academic career.

You can do your bit for dental education. You might consider a complete or partial career change from the private to the university sector. Contributing money to fund-raising activities by either the individual schools or DCF will have a major beneficial impact. You can also speak to political decision-makers about how a vibrant dental education sector contributes to the health of Canadians.

Dentistry has always been an innovative profession ready to adapt to a changing environment. With our best efforts, we can ensure a bright future for the dental education sector.

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