

# Editorial

## PROFESSION AND INDUSTRY CAN SHARE INTERESTS



*Dr. John P. O'Keefe*

**H**ave you ever wondered why the prices charged by some Canadian dental suppliers are lower than those charged by others? I did recently while reading a glossy flyer from a distributor I had never heard of. I then went online and compared the prices of materials advertised in the flyer with those listed by well-known suppliers.

The listed prices differed substantially between the big and small companies for many items. However, low prices do not always connote good value. Low overhead providers can actually produce poor value if they don't offer after-sales service or if low inventories lead to delays in delivery. I know that good value for money for dental supplies is important to readers because of the many phone calls I received this summer about the unsavoury business practices of one supply company.

Some of these calls were particularly provocative. One caller asked why there is a "large mark-up on dental supplies in Canada." Another asked me how he could find out if a particular supply house was a legitimate operator. Yet another caller expressed concern about the safety of some materials being distributed in Canada by dealers who may have low prices rather than quality as their primary business goal.

Looking closer at the dental supplies business, I found that outside of the legitimate channels, there are black and grey markets for these products. A black market exists when there are clearly illegal actions being perpetrated, such as a supplier passing off counterfeit or stolen materials as a legitimate offering. A grey market exists when legitimate goods made by bona fide manufacturers, destined for sale in a developing country, find their way onto the Canadian market at deeply discounted prices.

The grey market is particularly upsetting for manufacturers and their authorized dealers when they see these products coming into Canada advertised as bargains. The conditions for this grey market exist because manufacturers need to sell materials at considerably discounted prices to low-income countries, where the fees commanded by dentists are much lower than in Canada.

"Cherish the creativity generated by free enterprise" you might respond as you celebrate the savings to your overhead, courtesy of the grey market. Of course, the overall impact of those savings may be quite small if we assume that consumable supplies represent just 7% of office overhead.

You have no guarantee that grey market products have been transported and stored according to the manufacturer's instructions. If you have a problem with the materials, the

manufacturer may not offer warranty protection (even though some grey market distributors claim they will assume this responsibility). There is also no guarantee that products destined for other countries have undergone the rigorous testing required of products for sale in Canada.

The probability of problems occurring with these materials may be small. However, we can minimize their occurrence by adhering to consistently high standards in all aspects of oral health care provision. It is hard for us to argue that high standards are required for the licensing of dentists in Canada, but that less than optimal standards are acceptable for the materials that we place in patients' mouths.

Wherever you choose to purchase your materials and devices, be sure to consult the Health Canada databases of legally registered manufacturers and distributors in Canada. You can also identify whether or not the products they sell meet the standards required by the Therapeutic Products Directorate of the regulatory agency. Links to these searchable databases are available at <http://www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-70/issue-10/659.html>.

If there are matters of common concern that need to be discussed by the profession and industry (e.g., how to enhance access to dental care and to lobby for increased regulatory efficiency), perhaps now is the time to establish an ongoing dialogue between CDA and the Dental Industry Association of Canada. It is in the best interests of the people represented by both national organizations to ensure that the highest quality oral health care is available to all Canadians.

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