

President's Column

THE ABILITY AND THE WILL



Dr. Alfred Dean

The future of the health care system in Canada is a complicated and contentious issue. An article in the national press and a conference I attended in Calgary sparked my own thoughts on the future of health care in this country.

On August 5, André Picard of the *Globe and Mail* wrote an article about the lack of universal access to dental care services in Canada. His subtitle read, "A healthy mouth is part of a healthy body and too few Canadians see a dentist regularly. Let's make dental part of medicare." He quoted the federal Minister of State for Public Health as saying that Canada has a "health care system where the mouth is not considered a part of the body."

With this article fresh in my mind, I recently spoke at the International Congress on Special Care Issues in Dentistry. Over 400 delegates representing 35 countries gathered to

discuss ways to improve access to and quality of oral health care for special needs and elderly patients.

In my remarks to these dedicated practitioners, I noted that at some point, all dentists are called upon to deliver care to special needs patients. We may treat an elderly patient with physical or mental ailments, an autistic child or a patient with Down syndrome. Many of us have been frustrated trying to find appropriate care for severely handicapped or bedridden patients in seniors' facilities. Discussions at the conference were not limited to finding the best ways to treat elderly or special needs patients. There was much discussion about the best ways to ensure access to care for *all* dental patients.

Mr. Picard's article and the Special Care conference have one common theme: access to care. Collectively, we must ask ourselves if we have the ability and the will to ensure that all Canadians receive the care we need and deserve.

Access to care is an issue that may arise at varying stages in one's life. If you are as old as I am or have elderly parents or children with disabilities, you are probably more concerned about the issue than the young adult. Yet if you are as old as I am, you will also remember when provinces had comprehensive dental care for children through to their teenaged years. Today in Nova Scotia, children are provided with basic dental treatment to the age of 10. This age level now varies from province to province. Times have changed.

The media talks about a looming shortage of practitioners in Canada. While there is conflicting evidence on this issue, I believe the number of practitioners is the least of our concerns. In terms of ability, we live in a prosperous country and can produce the dentists this country requires.

However, we also need the will to provide adequate funding to our institutions. Canada has emerged from a period of extensive funding cutbacks to universities, teaching hospitals and health care in general. Results of these cuts can be seen with high tuition fees, fewer residency programs and operating room shortages.

One could argue that historically, Canada has not been adept at providing health care for the less fortunate — particularly the elderly and disabled. Many seniors enter facilities with a myriad of health problems, often without adequate resources to access required dental care. These seniors' facilities can also fail to recognize the importance of their residents' dental needs.

Which brings me back to Mr. Picard's suggestion of making dental care part of medicare. This notion is contradictory to CDA's position. We believe the appropriate path is to strengthen the social safety net and provide adequate funding to our dental faculties. We should not be so eager to dismiss the time-tested partnership of dentists, employers, insurers and patients in favour of merging dentistry into universal medicare. The medicare envelope is already stretched thin and suffers from many so-called warts — including long waiting lists and doctor shortages.

However, since Mr. Picard published his article, I have received feedback urging the profession to press for the inclusion of dentistry in the national medicare system. What do you think our approach should be? Your opinions are important to us.

We need your help. Please help us.

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