

Guest Editorial

LET'S MAINTAIN OUR NATIONAL STANDARDS



Dr. Donald M. Bonang

Extensive amounts of time, human resources and finances are being directed toward responding to the growing perception that Canada is experiencing a shortage of dentists. Members of the public and government express concern that access to timely and affordable dental care is becoming harder to attain. Many avenues are being explored in an effort to address this concern, be it real or perceived.

One direction that causes great concern to this writer is the request that Dental Regulatory Authorities (DRAs) “massage” long-established registration requirements in order to allow dentists trained outside of North America to practise in this country.

The quality of dental health care available to Canadians is among the best in the world. This did not happen by chance or by accident. Rather, it has evolved over many

decades. The increase in knowledge, education, skill and competence of the profession has resulted in a high standard of care, creating one or more generations of Canadians who may never experience the ravages of dental decay and tooth loss.

The dental profession is extremely proud of this accomplishment, which is largely due to preventive measures developed and implemented by the profession itself. Accreditation of our training institutions and programs, successful completion of national examinations and mandatory continuing dental education requirements for re-registration all set and maintain standards that the public expects and respects. The Canadian public benefits from these high standards which are set at a national level.

If we are experiencing an actual shortage of dentists in Canada and not simply caught up in the general perceptions related to the delivery of overall public health care, then how should we address this shortage?

There can be little doubt that a country as prosperous as Canada has the ability to educate sufficient human resources to continue to provide a high standard of dental care for its citizens.

Should the government not assist its citizens to gain a seat in our highly competitive and limited learning institutions by expanding these institutions? Should the government not compliment the dental profession on the maintenance of our standards? Unfortunately, this is not the government’s current focus in addressing the manpower issue. Certain DRAs are being directed to make access to registration an easier, friendlier process for applicants educated outside of our accredited institutions.

National meetings have been frequent as DRAs work tirelessly to develop and respond to working documents, while discussing alternatives

with the dental schools. Since registration is a provincial jurisdiction, DRAs are inclined to address local or provincial issues that can have a negative rippling effect on other jurisdictions.

Critics of the licensing authorities and DRAs suggest that certain barriers have been created to “protect their own” or to “close the doors to outsiders.” Such allegations are offensive to a profession that has established high standards to protect the public interest. Governments should not be permitted to force any lowering of standards or the creation of multiple avenues to registration in this country.

I recognize the complexity of this issue, with its social, humanitarian and political implications. Should there be access to the dental profession for foreign-trained dentists? Of course. Should there be varying levels of competence in the dental profession? Of course not. Should there be assistance available to foreign-trained dentists to upgrade to our standards? Yes, but at whose expense?

My concern is that the government will continue to react from a political standpoint — one that may conflict with the best interest of the Canadian public. DRAs must not respond in isolation and focus solely on local issues and pressures. Our approach must be to address the issues from a national perspective, balancing humanitarian concerns with the maintenance of the high standard of dental health care that has been achieved in Canada.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association or the Provincial Dental Board of Nova Scotia.