

President's Column

LISTENING TO THE PUBLIC



Dr. Alfred Dean

It can be difficult to see yourself as others see you. In my experience, many dentists have a distorted idea of how they are viewed by the general public. Moreover, the dental profession as a whole has trouble seeing itself through the public's eyes.

One way to determine the public's perception of dentistry is to ask. CDA did just that in a national telephone survey of over 1,800 Canadians conducted at the end of 2004. For the most part, the results are quite encouraging and should be considered a source of pride for the profession.

Overwhelmingly, patients see dentists as skilled and professional and having their best interests in mind. Survey participants said they trust the advice their dentist gives them and they feel dentists provide reliable information about their oral health. In fact, when ranked against other professions, such as lawyers, physicians, pharma-

cists and accountants, dentists were rated the highest in terms of level of professionalism.

These results point to the fact that dentists are doing a good job of maintaining the public's confidence about their role in delivering good oral health care. This is especially significant when you consider that almost two-thirds of those surveyed said that their dentist is their main source of oral health care and treatment information.

When asked about levels of service, dentistry also performed very well. Almost 90% of participants responded positively to questions related to office location, hours of operation, being able to communicate in the language of their choice and being able to see the dentist of their choice.

The public appears to be hearing our profession's messages about the importance of good oral health. The number of people reporting good hygiene habits is on the rise, as is the number reporting a dental visit at least once a year. Dental phobias seem to be decreasing, with more patients expressing how benign a dental visit has become relative to many years ago.

The survey revealed that communication with patients may be an area for improvement. When asked, very few patients had been consulted on general health issues. Two-thirds of respondents said that their dentist did not discuss a link between oral health and other conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or stroke. Similarly, results showed that dentists do not appear to talk to their patients about the symptoms of oral cancer. However, patients reported that they are very interested in receiving information in the form of brochures and they enjoy reading this material when it is made available.

Respondents were not shy about saying that they believe that govern-

ment has a role to play in oral health. Almost 90% suggested that the government should play a larger role in raising awareness of oral health among Canadians. The federal government has moved one step closer to fulfilling this role by appointing a Chief Dental Officer position at Health Canada. Dr. Peter Cooney will assume this new role and part of his mandate includes promoting improvements in the oral health status of Canadians. It was also interesting to note that 80% of those asked expressed a desire to see the national health care system expanded to include some level of dental care.

I've just summarized a lot of statistics but what do they all mean? CDA must plan future public education strategies and develop materials for our members by continually monitoring the attitudes and needs of our patients. This information helps identify areas where greater efforts can be directed to improve relationships with patients.

One such area that could benefit from increased examination is the seniors population in Canada. In February, I attended the first ever Seniors Oral Health Forum — a meeting between CDA and the provincial dental associations — where we began the process of identifying the key issues and steps for action to address this looming health care crisis.

The dental profession needs to learn more about the specific needs of seniors. Surveys and statistics gatherings are ways to engage Canadians of all ages in a dialogue about oral health. I believe that opportunities for exchanges between patients and the profession inevitably lead to opportunities for improvements in the delivery of oral health care.

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