



Dr. Wayne Halstrom

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CDA's Success on Parliament Hill

Each year, CDA's government relations department organizes a series of meetings with parliamentarians of all stripes for the Days on the Hill event. In November, we were fortunate to make contact with some 50 members of Parliament, ranging from an audience with the prime minister to meetings with senior cabinet ministers and influential parliamentary secretaries.

The dental profession is represented at these meetings by members of CDA's Government Relations and Public Advocacy Committee, CDA officers, senior staff and other individuals who can offer expertise on specific issues. For instance, Dr. David Mock, chair of the Association of Canadian Faculties of Dentistry Deans' Committee, once again accompanied our group to Parliament Hill to offer the perspective of dental schools.

The overall goal of Days on the Hill is not only to raise awareness of dentistry among our elected officials, but also to address specific issues affecting the profession. A common opening remark from parliamentarians in these face-to-face sessions is “What is your number one issue?” Our primary message this year was to emphasize the importance of oral health to one's overall health status. It is vital to remind federal leaders how oral health can affect the functional, psychological and social dimensions of an individual's general health. In other words, we need to “put the mouth back in the body” in the public discourse on general health.

We also took every opportunity to bring other significant issues and initiatives to the government's attention. On dental education, we brought forward recommendations that the federal government take action to increase its financial support for dental schools, pointing out that the clinics at our schools often provide affordable dental services to many low-income

individuals and families. Such government support would go a long way in helping to alleviate some of the pressures driving tuition fee increases at our universities.

Seniors' oral health issues, and the Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) dental program specifically, were also brought to the attention of certain MPs. These sessions informed the government of the problems some dentists and patients have encountered with the program's \$600 threshold for basic care and its reduction in dental coverage to 90% of the fee schedule.

We urged the government to take a leadership role in making improvements to the VAC dental program, effectively setting a positive example for the structure and delivery of seniors' oral care programs. This could be accomplished by providing comprehensive education, preventive and restorative coverage and fair reimbursement levels to providers.

Another initiative that really caught the attention of MPs was CDA's proposal for the establishment of a Personal Wellness Investment Fund that would act like an RRSP or RESP, where individuals with a registered fund could make contributions during their working years. Those funds would remain dedicated for health care spending, presumably after retirement and in the absence of an applicable insurance plan. The principal benefit of this structure is that the accumulated income used to cover medical costs would not be subject to income tax.

I believe it is important for governments to put creative thought into meeting the oral health needs of Canadians who reach retirement only to find a significant decrease in their dental benefits. I am cautiously optimistic that these efforts will bear fruit.

Our Days on the Hill meetings are an ideal opportunity for CDA to give voice to the dentists of Canada on a national level. These efforts help us continue to make strides in working to improve the oral health and overall health of all Canadians.

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Dr. Halstrom was invited to write a guest editorial for an upcoming edition of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)*. The editorial, which explores the relationship of the dental and medical professions and the importance of oral health to overall health, will appear in the January 16, 2007 edition. Look for the *CMAJ* editorial at www.cmaj.ca.