

# Dr. Philip Poon: Delivering Dentistry's Message to Ottawa

*Dr. Philip Poon of Winnipeg joined CDA's Government Relations and Public Advocacy Committee in 2002 and was elected chair in 2004. Dr. Poon recently sat down with JCDA to discuss his role as chair and to provide his personal insights about the committee's wide range of initiatives and activities.*

Dr. Philip Poon first became involved in organized dentistry shortly after graduation in 1980, when he joined the Complaints Committee at the Manitoba Dental Association (MDA). After being appointed to the MDA Board, Dr. Poon eventually went on to serve a term as president in 1999. However, his involvement in organized dentistry didn't end after his term. Dr. Poon says the importance of access to care issues and advocating for optimal oral health for all Canadians is what motivates him to continue doing committee work at the national level.

"CDA works with the federal government on issues that are quite important to me personally, which is why I initially accepted the role on the Government Relations and Public Advocacy Committee," he recalls. "I've always been concerned with access to care and I feel that the committee has a significant advocacy role to play on this issue."

The committee's broad mandate is to ensure a consistent approach in CDA's messa-

ging to government, media and the public on national oral health issues. Dr. Poon sees one of the committee's primary goals as increasing awareness about the importance of oral health.

"One of our main challenges is to try to bring oral health issues on a par with general health in the eyes of the public and the government," he explains. "The importance of oral health is a given amongst oral health professionals, but it can sometimes be difficult to convince others."

The committee has essentially adopted a two-pronged approach in this endeavour: educating the public and engaging the government directly. The latter is achieved through Days on the Hill meetings and activities of the Political Action Committee, and by maintaining regular contact with government officials in a range of departments throughout the year.

## Dentists Informing Politicians

Days on the Hill is CDA's annual 2-day blitz of meetings, organized to keep oral health issues on the government's agenda. CDA government relations staff organize personal meetings with federal party leaders, cabinet ministers, MPs and senior government officials. These meetings provide the perfect opportunity for CDA to communicate its initiatives, strategies and positions to the people who make decisions on Parliament Hill. The 2006 meetings took place November 20 and 21 and were highlighted by sessions with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Bill Graham, interim leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Poon emphasizes that Days on the Hill is only one of a series of activities undertaken by CDA to engage the government on issues related to oral health and dentistry. "Government relations is more than a once-a-year lobbying effort. CDA staff do so much



Dr. Philip Poon enjoys a lighter moment at the 2006 Days on the Hill meetings with (l.) Dr. Wayne Halstrom, CDA president, and (r.) Dr. David Mock, chair of the Association of Canadian Faculties of Dentistry Deans' Committee.

work behind the scenes, to an extent that I never fully appreciated until I became involved with the committee,” he explains. “CDA staff often resolve issues before dentists even hear about them.”

Along with these formal meetings with the federal government, the committee promotes initiatives that engage politicians at the grassroots level. In 2005, CDA formed the Political Action Committee, with the goal of assembling a small group of politically active dentists to liaise with their local members of Parliament. The intent was to create well-informed, manageable relationships with MPs at the constituency level.

“Dentists need to deliver the profession’s message directly to politicians because we are the ones actually delivering the care,” stresses Dr. Poon. “It complements the efforts of CDA staff, as dentists can provide politicians with first-hand accounts of what we face every day as clinicians.”

### Diverse Issues

In his role as committee chair, Dr. Poon has become familiar with the broad range of files that CDA’s government relations department deals with. He has seen CDA achieve significant improvements on behalf of the dental profession on major issues over the years. These range from successfully lobbying for equitable taxation of dental benefits, increasing the RRSP contribution levels, working for increased tobacco control legislation, signing the memorandum of understanding with Health Canada on dental amalgam waste, continually trying to make the Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program function more effi-

ciently, clarifying dentists’ obligations under the PIPEDA privacy regulations, and most recently, achieving the new Chief Dental Officer position within Health Canada.

“CDA played a big part in the creation of the Chief Dental Officer position and I think it will help raise the profile of dentistry in government to the level where we think it should be,” notes Dr. Poon.

CDA started lobbying for a Chief Dental Officer in 2001. The stated objective was to create an office that would undertake oral health promotion activities and work toward the collection of statistical oral health indicators. Dr. Peter Cooney has been in the position since 2005 and successfully worked to obtain funding for the Canadian Health Measures Survey (CHMS), a ‘direct measures’ national survey that will include an oral health clinical examination component for the first time in over 3 decades. Beginning in 2007, this survey will provide current data on the oral health of Canadians and help to evaluate the association between oral health and other systemic health issues (see page 876 for more details on the CHMS).

### Collective Communication

Dr. Poon acknowledges that approaching the government on oral health issues can be challenging task. He stresses that the dental profession must speak in a unified voice. “We always work in cooperation with other stakeholders, such as the dental faculties, provincial dental associations and dental regulatory authorities, because the government is more apt to listen if we have a single message,” he notes. “When you speak with a unified voice, it underscores the importance of that particular issue.”

Part of that message is about the primacy of the dentist in the oral care team. “One of the consistent messages we bring to the federal government is that dentists are the leaders of the team,” he explains. “The policy makers need to be reminded that dentists are the only oral health care providers who are able to diagnose and make full oral health plans for patients.”

CDA builds relationships and works in cooperation with many professional organizations to educate the government about its positions and concerns regarding the oral health of Canadians. Most notably, CDA joins forces on relevant issues with the Canadian Coalition



Dr. Mock (l.) greets the Honourable James Peterson, Liberal MP for Willowdale, as Dr. Poon and Mr. Andrew Jones, CDA director of Corporate and Government Relations, look on.



The Honourable Steven Fletcher (centre), parliamentary secretary to the minister of health, took time to meet with CDA officials and Government Relations and Advocacy Committee members (l. to r.) Dr. Wayne Halstrom, CDA president, Dr. Andrew Kay of Toronto, Dr. Heather Torrie of Saskatoon and Mr. George Weber, CDA executive director. (Photos courtesy of tecklesphoto.com)

for Public Health in the 21st Century, the National Professional Association Coalition on Tuition, the Retirement Income Coalition and the Canadian Coalition for Action on Tobacco (CCAT).

CDA's work with CCAT and tobacco cessation is one area where Dr. Poon feels that dentists can play a key role. As front-line health care providers, dentists see the devastating effects of tobacco on oral health, namely oral cancer and gum diseases.

"CDA has played a significant advocacy role in the fight to eliminate tobacco use in Canada, especially in the introduction of graphic tobacco warning labels on cigarette packages," he explains. Most recently, these efforts seem to be paying dividends as 3 major cigarette manufacturers agreed to phase out the use of the words 'light' and 'mild' on their packaging by 2007.

**To learn more about CDA's government relations activities, including how to become involved with the Political Action Committee, visit: [www.cda-adc.ca/en/cda/about\\_cda/government\\_relations/default.asp](http://www.cda-adc.ca/en/cda/about_cda/government_relations/default.asp).**

## Promoting the Profession

Through his involvement on the committee, Dr. Poon has gained an appreciation of the work performed by CDA on behalf of dentists. "The role has allowed me to see what goes on behind the scenes," he says. "I didn't fully appreciate the amount of work being done on behalf of dentists, work that allows us to prosper and enjoy our high standing in the community."

"Everything from the USC&LS codes to consent forms — sometimes it's easy to forget that these are not automatic but a result of the work of others," notes Dr. Poon. "Day to day, these issues are being attended to by CDA and that is very comforting for me."

He remains optimistic about the future of dentistry in Canada, while acknowledging that there is still much work to be done. "We need to continue to raise the profile of dentistry, dentists and oral health in Canada," he says. "This

can be achieved locally by having dentists participate in charitable programs such as the Open Wide free dental clinics that take place in Manitoba."

"If we raise the profile of the profession and become more visible, people will be more likely to listen to our messages," he believes.

Listening to Dr. Poon, one cannot help but sense his gratitude. "I am very thankful that I am part of a well-respected profession," he says. "Ultimately, the reason that I dedicate my time on a CDA committee on behalf of dentists is because I am very grateful to be a dentist in Canada." ❖

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*Sean McNamara is writer/editor at the Canadian Dental Association.*