



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

“Each one of us must do our bit for the environment and for the profession by reducing the release of any potentially harmful substances from dental offices.”

## Dentistry Cares about the Environment

As I write this piece, there is scarcely any snow on the ground outside my office window. There would be nothing particularly unusual about that statement if I wasn't in Ottawa in early January. The sun is shining and we have been walking around town without winter coats this month. Is this just a freak transitory phenomenon, or is it a manifestation of climate change?

In scanning the media, it seems to me that the environment has become the hot political topic in Canada, temporarily displacing health care. The issue is flaunted as the trump card of the newly elected leader of the official opposition. The Green Party is a growing, albeit still small, political party. During the recent shuffle of the federal cabinet, most discussion was about the change in the Ministry of the Environment portfolio. Perhaps this is because political pundits believe the winning and losing of the next general election will depend on the relative appeal of the parties in terms of their environmental policies.

In keeping with my desire to present topical and important information for dentists in *JCDA*, we publish this month an article by Dr. Margot Hiltz on the environmental impact of dentistry. Dr. Hiltz recognizes that some of the materials we use in dental practice have the potential to create environmental challenges — if we consider the profession's total output of these materials. While she discusses biomedical waste, lead, silver and general office waste, a good part of her article is devoted to best management practices for the handling of dental amalgam and the safe disposal of amalgam waste.

The installation of an amalgam separator is mandatory in many types of dental offices in some parts of the country, while installation remains voluntary in other locations. Dr. Hiltz's article cites that by early 2006, 97% of Manitoba dentists had installed a separator in a voluntary

regime. In my opinion, this is a good example of how seriously the Canadian dental profession takes its environmental responsibilities in the area of amalgam waste management.

Of course, the dental profession's commitment to environmental responsibility is not new. In 2002, CDA signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Canada, aimed at bringing about a voluntary reduction of mercury release from dental offices by 95% in 5 years. The Association took this step because our leadership foresaw a change of political climate in which governments would be more willing to force compliance in the area of mercury release, and we wished for dentistry to avoid this fate.

As part of the agreement, our profession pledged to evaluate progress toward the goal of 95% reduction. Dr. Philip Watson of the faculty of dentistry at the University of Toronto took the lead in performing a national baseline study of mercury release from dental offices in 2003. Using the same methodology, and with the encouragement and support of CDA, Dr. Watson now hopes to complete the follow-up study by the end of 2007.

I believe it will be crucial for the continuing political credibility of our profession that we successfully demonstrate our responsibility in a voluntary reduction regime. With voters perceived to be so concerned about the environment, political decision makers realize there is political capital to be gained in being seen to take strong action on environmental issues. Each one of us must do our bit for the environment and for the profession by reducing the release of any potentially harmful substances from dental offices.

As exemplified by the beautiful image from Jasper National Park on our cover, Canada's environment is certainly worth protecting. Other material in this edition informs you that CDA will be hosting its Annual Convention in beautiful Jasper in May 2007, in conjunction with the Alberta Dental Association and College. I invite you to come along and take a few days to marvel at the beauty of the Rockies.

*John O'Keefe*  
1-800-267-6354, ext. 2297  
[jokeefe@cda-adc.ca](mailto:jokeefe@cda-adc.ca)