



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Oral Health and General Health Are Inseparable

April is National Oral Health Month (NOHM) and CDA is marking the event with a public campaign focusing on the important link between oral health and general health. JCDA is helping to recognize NOHM by publishing 3 feature articles in this edition that focus on the oral health–general health connection and on the Canadian oral health research community.

On page 211 you will find a panel discussion where Drs. Debora Matthews, Chris McCulloch, George Sándor and Howard Tenenbaum discuss the strength of the evidence linking periodontal disease and a number of systemic conditions, the ability of dentists to observe oral changes indicative of systemic ill health and the natural link between dental and medical research at the cellular level. These experts also offer their suggestions to individual dentists and dental organizations about the messages we should be giving to patients and the groups that we communicate with.

It was evident in speaking to these panellists that there is still much more to explore about many chronic disease processes through future research efforts. The Canadian dental profession has a proud research heritage, but what does the future hold? To examine the state of oral health research in Canada, we interviewed Dr. Richard Ellen of Toronto, starting on page 219.

If anybody can offer an informed view of oral health research it is Dr. Ellen, who is currently North America's Regional Board Member for the International Association for Dental Research. He also has his finger on the pulse of the relationship between oral and other biomedical research communities as a member of the Advisory Board of the Institute of Musculoskeletal Health and Arthritis (IMHA). IMHA is the institute within the Canadian Institutes of Health

Research (CIHR) through which much of the federal funding for oral health research flows.

While some may bemoan the fact that there isn't a separate oral health research institute in Canada, Dr. Ellen is not among them. He believes that our research community, although small in numbers, has fared very well since CIHR was created, mainly because oral health researchers have been focused and strategic in their efforts. Dr. Ellen believes that collaboration with researchers in other biomedical disciplines will also be crucial for the advancement of oral health research in Canada.

Whatever challenges oral health researchers currently face, the difficulty of attracting talented new recruits to a career in research is probably the most significant. Why should a young dentist consider pursuing this avenue? Because this career is both interesting and intellectually stimulating, according to the 4 researchers we profile in our final feature article on page 225. These people speak of the excitement they find in combining research with clinical work and teaching. They also cite collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines as a source of great satisfaction.

The major point that strikes me in these 3 articles is that any separation between oral health and general health is completely artificial. The divide, and it does exist, is a product of mental barriers created by the separate historical development of the dental and medical professions and reinforced by differing payment systems. I would wager that the divide also persists because some dentists do not wish to operate in the publicly funded Canadian health care system and also because many health care administrators do not view oral care as being "essential" health care.

Certain segments vital to the future of our profession can be hard hit when public administrators perceive dentistry as separate from other aspects of health care: dental educators, researchers, public health dentists and hospital dentists come to mind. As a profession, we need to pay particular attention to the needs of these colleagues who interface most with the public sector. Reinforcing the message that health and oral health are inseparable concepts will surely help our cause.

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