



Dr. Darryl Smith

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Setting the Agenda for the Future

The end of May found CDA's Board of Directors engaged in its annual planning session to look at issues and trends that must be managed on behalf of organized dentistry in partnership with our corporate members, dental schools and specialties. Mr. Bill Prentice, senior vice-president of government and public affairs of the American Dental Association, participated in the discussions. Despite geopolitical boundaries, our organizations face similar issues. Society is changing and dentistry is now part of the global marketplace.

Several of Mr. Prentice's messages were sobering and 3 of his messages in particular stood out for me. 1) Despite dentistry's vision of optimal oral health care, in the eyes of government and the public, some care is better than no care, even if it is of a lesser quality. 2) Even when presented with overwhelming evidence, government and the public will not always base their decisions on science. 3) In order for the profession of dentistry to maintain respect, it must come up with proactive solutions to the issues it faces by setting its own agenda and maintaining its values, rather than adopting a reactive and defensive strategy.

For a profession that has always based its reputation on science and the best possible care model, the first 2 points are disturbing. However, the third point is encouraging and forces us to step back and ask some key questions of our profession. Do we have a philosophy of proposing solutions or opposing concepts from others? Do we provide all the care our patients require?

Over the years, the debate surrounding dental human resources and scope of practice has been one of the most difficult to deal with. Access to care, or, put another way, the lack of access, continues to drive this debate. The solution that appears to have gained the greatest acceptance by governments and others is a move to alternative

models of care. While I recognize that there are other influences underlying this issue, such as internal politics and political aspirations, much of the debate would resolve itself if all the oral health care needs of society were being met.

Here are some of solutions, questions and ideas for the profession to explore:

- What is our brand? The profession must decide how it wishes to be viewed by government and the public and our communication strategy must emphasize the value of the team approach, which leads to comprehensive care in the dental office.
- What are the skills that make good practitioners? Does the current admission process adequately evaluate skills and qualities outside of academic achievement, such as communication, compassion and a dedication to service?
- Does the education system properly prepare future dentists to provide comprehensive care and instill in them the values and responsibilities that define this profession?
- Practitioners must take the leadership role in communicating with their patients on their oral health and treatment needs and not shift this responsibility to others. Every time a patient is in your office, you must take the time to sit down with them and discuss their needs, wants and how their treatment is going, so the focus returns to the relationship between the dentist and the patient.
- There must be funding from government and recognition that public oral health programs are a critical component of achieving disease prevention, awareness and wellness in the broader community.
- We must reexamine our education system and create a learning continuum that recognizes skills, training and experience so as to create pathways for advancement through all the oral health disciplines.

This list is by no means complete and may not represent your vision. I would appreciate hearing your thoughts via CDA's members' forum (www.cda-adc.ca/forum) on how the profession should deal with what we face collectively. We must take back ownership of the complete knowledge base and in so doing, provide and supervise the care Canadians need for optimum oral health.

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