



Dr. Mary McNally

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IDEALS Congress Comes to Canada

It would be hard to imagine a more appropriate acronym than IDEALS to describe a professional group whose *raison d'être* is to foster an international dialogue on the values guiding the practise of oral health care.

The International Dental Ethics and Law Society (IDEALS) was founded in 1999 when a number of experts in the field of dental ethics and law decided to explore the feasibility of creating a new international society. Motivated by interest generated during biennial dental ethics and law congresses held in Europe since the early nineties, the founding members formalized the network and have worked hard to maintain this unique society ever since.

The tradition of a biannual congress has continued under the formal IDEALS banner, and was held for the first time in Canada from May 24–26, 2007. Organized and chaired by founding member and Toronto dentist Dr. Richard (Dick) Speers and his team of dedicated volunteers, the congress welcomed participants from 15 countries — from Australia to Sweden to Peru — at the 7th International Ethics and Law Congress held at St. Michael's College in Toronto. Educators, historians, lawyers, ethicists, dentists, dental hygienists, physicians, policy makers, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists came together for discussions on the theme “Human Rights and Oral Health Care.”

The preamble to the World Health Organization's 1946 constitution stated that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being.” This statement emphasizes the global value of health and its place as a right for all people. Although we may think that the moral dimensions of global human rights are too far removed from our day-to-day clinical practices to be meaningful, in fact, examining oral health care through the lens of human rights serves to elucidate many important questions about the values that shape our professional lives every day.

For instance, what is the meaning of patient autonomy and human rights for those who are challenged by poverty, by extraordinary burdens of disease, by political instability and limited access to care? What is our role in safeguarding the autonomy and human rights of vulnerable populations whose care is influenced by poorly designed or fraudulent research? How do we address health care injustices that arise from the misconception that oral health is separate from general health in the public health care domain?

These are just a few of the questions raised at the IDEALS congress that unveil deeper professional challenges concerning our collective moral commitment. The establishment of standards of care and professional practice, minimizing harm and maximizing benefits, treating patients fairly and honestly, and attending to social injustice within and outside our borders represent values and challenges that move beyond dentistry. The moral enterprise concerned with righting wrongs and maximizing benefits associated with these important values can evolve only with meaningful engagement among those who care.

From the wonderfully dynamic opening plenary until the closing dinner, the IDEALS congress provided a venue for participants to reflect on many questions, challenges and strategies for change. The conference report on page 337 provides an overview of the plenary sessions and topics discussed.

In closing, I would be remiss if I did not mention the attendance of a Canadian icon in dentistry, retired scholar and former dean of the faculty of dentistry at the University of Toronto Dr. Gordon Nikiforuk. For those of us who had an opportunity to chat with Dr. Nikiforuk, his presence at the congress was a poignant reminder that questions about oral health in the context of human health and professional values are not new to our profession.

Many relationships were created and others were strengthened at the congress, and assurances were made that this important work will continue. On behalf of IDEALS, I extend a heartfelt invitation to join us in Istanbul in 2009 for the 8th International IDEALS Congress (www.ideals.ac/).

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