



Dr. Deborah Stymiest

“The challenge for the modern dental school graduate will be to preserve the fundamental principles of our profession.”

Back to Basics

As I write this column, I am looking forward to attending my 25-year dental school class reunion. When the Dalhousie class of '83 gathers, I will be thankful to have an opportunity to share memories with treasured friends and colleagues. I hope we also take a moment to be thankful for how fortunate we were to choose a career as a dental professional.

My wave of nostalgia about dental school was heightened when I read about this year's CDA/Dentsply Student Clinician Research Program (p. 485). Engaging with the students in Toronto made it clear to me that we have many bright minds coming through our Canadian dental schools. While I would never presume to be an expert, thoughts about dental school made me wonder what advice I would give to current graduates.

During my career, there have been rapid changes in the dental care marketplace. In such a dynamic environment, where keeping up with the latest technology or technique is a constant challenge, it is easy to lose sight of our motivation for entering dentistry in the first place — namely to care for and interact with patients.

Issues such as high debt loads or personal pressures can often divert our focus from the well-being of our patients. We must try to rise above these challenges and put the needs of our patients first. Having a patient-centred practice that delivers the highest quality of care results in personal satisfaction for both the dentist and the patient.

Whether you are a new graduate or have been practising for a quarter century, it is important to realize that dentistry is a relatively secure and rewarding profession that strikes a balance between art, science, craft and business.

Recent trends in cosmetic and esthetic dentistry have resulted in some incredible advances and have changed the lives of many patients

and dentists. However, there appears to be an increased focus on elective procedures away from essential and preventive services. As practitioners receive more requests for esthetic services from patients free of oral disease, it signals a shift that society might be placing more value on oral esthetics rather than oral health.

I believe this subtle shift is steering dentistry away from being a profession to becoming more of a business. We should not allow these trends to erode the meaning and purpose of our professional existence. The word “profession” is rooted in the word “profess,” which means to vow or make a promise. As a profession, we have promised to place our knowledge and expertise at the service of society and to keep the oral health of our patients as our main priority. We have been granted the opportunity to practise dentistry as a result of the trust and respect that society places in this promise.

No one would deny that dentists must maintain a well-managed business model to support an excellent professional practice. However, being a professional is a way of life, not just a way of making a living. Financial gain is simply a by-product of fulfilling our professional promise.

My sense is that there is a need to get back to the basics of our profession — preventing oral disease and enhancing the overall health of our patients. The energy of the profession should be directed toward prevention and advocacy for access and an essential level of care for all Canadians.

With the growing appreciation that oral health and general health are intimately linked, there should also be a renewed focus on academia and research in dentistry. Reading the abstracts of this year's student clinicians encourages me that our dental schools are working toward this goal.

The challenge for the modern dental school graduate will be to preserve the fundamental principles of our profession. We must remember that what is good for the oral health of Canadians is good for the profession. We must not settle for the opposite notion — that what is good for the profession is good for the oral health of Canadians.

Deborah Stymiest, BSc, DDS
president@cda-adc.ca