



President's Page

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Collaboration: On a Global Scale

I have found over the last seven months that there is no such thing as coincidence and when one is open to them, the opportunities for collaboration and networking can come from the most unusual of places. As I was preparing to spend the holidays in London with my daughters, I received an e-introduction from Stephanie Mullen-Kavanagh (Executive Director of the Canadian Dental Assistants Association) to Fiona Ellwood (President and Patron of the Society of British Dental Nurses).

This introduction came as a result of discussions that were initiated by Stephanie to foster relationships and open the lines of communication between representatives from the American Dental Assistants Association (ADAA), Canadian Dental Assistants Association (CDAA) and the Society of British Dental Nurses (SBDN). The purpose of these discussions was to look at the possibilities of our three organizations collaborating to form an International Federation of Dental Assistants with a goal of creating alliances with national dental assistant associations from around the world.

While it seemed like a long shot at the time, the two of us made plans to meet while I was in London. As a result of Fiona's willingness to travel three hours by train to meet me in Central London, our plans became a reality. Over tea and cakes at the St. Pancras Hotel, Fiona and I shared our stories and the work that is being done by our organizations to promote the profession and meet the needs of the dental assistants/nurses in our respective countries.

From the very start of our conversation, it was obvious that regardless of the fact that we are continents apart, there are many similarities in the challenges facing dental assistants in the United States and dental nurses in the United Kingdom. We discussed the diversity of the dental assistants/nurses themselves in terms of education, experience, and even from a generational perspective. We looked at the need for the use of different communication methods including social media. We left our meeting together with a renewed interest in finding ways to work together and a greater appreciation for the work that was being carried out.

Although not in person, similar discussions initiated by the CDAA with both ADAA and SBDN, acknowledged that we too share similar challenges. The conversations between our three organizations have continued and expanded as a result of our understanding that these issues of commonality relating to challenges facing the dental assisting profession are not limited to the United States, United Kingdom, or Canada, but are global in nature as well. This only serves to reaffirm the importance of creating a collaborative partnership such as the International Federation of Dental Assistants.

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Some of the most common challenges that we identified as facing dental assistants/nurses include: lack of recognition of the value and contribution the profession brings to the dental team; education, regulatory, and scope of practice differences by state/province; and lack of representation on oral and public health initiatives.

Research shows that individuals, groups, and organizations that come together with a common goal can have an exponentially greater impact on the ability to achieve that goal. We have all heard the phrase, "there is power in numbers," and I firmly believe in the concept that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I would posit that this is true for a number of reasons. Foremost would be the value that comes from a diversity of perspectives on solutions to the challenges facing dental assistants/nurses and the dental assisting profession.

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Just as each of our individual associations work collaboratively to promote excellence in the profession through advocacy, education, and legislation, those same ideas can be shared to support excellence in these areas globally. While it is true that there are differences in the way accreditation and licensure requirements are implemented, there is a lot that can be learned from one another through the exchange of ideas and experiences. Finding ways to bring recognition to the important role that dental assistants/nurses currently play in providing quality patient care is one of the main focuses for the leadership of many national dental assistants associations. Experts point out that professional associations can have a significant impact when it comes to ensuring that care is being provided by qualified and recognized healthcare professionals.

Helping dental assistants have a voice is the driving force in terms of advocacy and support for the profession. One of the most important ways to bring recognition to the profession is by looking for opportunities to increase the presence of the dental assistant on oral health initiatives focused on improving not only oral health, but whole-body health as well. However, it will involve a change in mindset as we look at the bigger picture. Inter-professional collaboration will be

an important component in these efforts. Improved oral health and the highest safety and quality of care for our patients is at the core of all that we aim for as dental professionals. As advocates for the dental assisting profession we must look for opportunities to join with other allied health professionals in creating best practices that will address and support the achievement of these goals.

The importance of infection control and prevention to the safety and well-being of the patient cannot be overstated. Another challenge that the profession faces is bringing recognition to the role that the dental assistant/nurse plays as the key contributor to the performance of these duties and responsibilities. Ensuring that the proper training and education necessary to carry out these responsibilities are readily available is a critical component of compliance.

They say it takes a village. I would surmise that in fact it will take collaboration on a global scale. It will take all of us working together to bring recognition to the profession and the dental assistant professionals who take pride in their accomplishments and who strive towards excellence every day, for their patients, their offices, and themselves. 

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Building the Foundation for a Global Professional Community

By Stephanie Mullen-Kavanagh, Executive Director, Canadian Dental Assistants' Association



The Canadian Dental Assistants' Association (CDAA) focuses on advocacy, research and capacity-building for our member associations in Canada as we strive for professional excellence. We believe these priorities can be applied to universal advantage, not just within Canada, but internationally; identifying similarities and differences between the professional situation of Canadian dental assistants and those of other countries will provide valuable insight and contribute to an understanding of professional challenges and opportunities. The CDAA believes the key to professional advancement lies in listening, in learning and in sharing information about dental assisting both here in Canada and abroad.

The CDAA has been a proud advocate of Canadian dental assisting for the past 75 years, ensuring that the perspective of Canadian dental assistants is brought forward in any discussion related to oral health. It is now time to broaden our perspective, to look at the larger landscape, and assess the impact situations such as a global economy, global labour mobility, and health issues are having on the dental assisting profession and workforce. It is our professional obligation to establish how global health trends such as the aging population are influencing our profession and identify a path forward for dental assistants to make their most valuable contribution towards improving the oral health of the global community. Creating linkages with our colleagues from around the globe, creating best practices and developing a comprehensive knowledge base are critical steps towards improving patient outcomes both within our Canadian borders and around the globe.

The idea of building an international dental assisting organization began as a faint dream several years ago; we thought: as the largest oral health workforce globally, how can we best contribute to global oral health? The idea was a regular topic of discussion between CDAA staff and Board members but with the many other demands on our resources we were unable to make it priority despite our conviction that an international group could provide great benefits, to both public health and to the profession. It was a dream and a topic of

conversation that wouldn't die; we continued to ask ourselves: Wouldn't it be great if there was an international group advocating for dental assistants worldwide? Why isn't the perspective, expertise and knowledge of the vast global workforce of dental assistants and dental nurses around the world being heard alongside our oral health colleagues? Could we not find a way to move this idea from a dream into a reality? Is it even possible? Where would we even begin? Inherently we knew that the issues facing Canadian dental assistants are shared with our colleagues in other parts of the world, but we struggled with how and where to begin to share our experiences.

As a feminized workforce, isolated by private practice settings, there has historically been little to no communication or linkages between our members, associations and other dental assisting organizations around the world.

Eventually, tentatively, we decided to build a list of dental assisting organizations from across the globe and drafted letters of invitation, asking organizations to contact us if they were interested in establishing an international organization for the profession of dental assisting/dental nursing. CDAA was seeking partners from among our colleagues around the world to foster a community of sharing, research development, and best practices. Issues such as labour mobility, occupational analysis and workplace health and safety are facing all health professionals in our global economy and the CDAA's goal was to open the lines of communication

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with our international colleagues to begin to better address these challenges. It was our conviction that dental assistants would be stronger united—we felt there is value in learning from each other and striving to advance our profession. As a feminized workforce, isolated by private practice settings, there has historically been little to no communication or linkages between our members, associations and other dental assisting organizations around the world. We knew it was time to change this paradigm. And so, letters were drafted, sealed and posted...and then, we waited.

Admittedly, as the Executive Director of the CDAA, I worked this initiative off the side of my desk for months...a file that I would pick up whenever I had a free moment during very busy workdays filled with many competing projects. The months passed. Then, one day, I received an email from Ms. Fiona Ellwood, the President of the Society of British Dental Nurses who was looking for more information about our letter and our thoughts about creating a partnership with dental assisting associations around the world. Coincidentally, the Society was also looking to establish partnerships around the world. I had the pleasure of connecting with Fiona several times over emails and phone conversations and a relationship began to form. Our Board members were thrilled to finally meet Fiona via Skype when she presented at our Annual General Meeting in 2017 and throughout the following years we would reach out with questions or share information on issues of mutual interest.

Then, late last year, through another working group that I support in my role at the CDAA, I was able to connect with Robynn Rixse, the President of the American Dental Assistants' Association. I thought perhaps it was time to reach out once again and attempt to generate interest in forming an international association. We set a time for a conference call and I was amazed by our amazing conversation, brimming with eagerness for collaboration and support—the spirit of connection over the telephone line was palpable. At that time, I promised to connect Robynn and Fiona and the rest, as they say, is history! Since then we have met via conference call several times and Robynn and Fiona were even able to meet in person; myself and our CDAA President, Sina Allegro-Sacco, are privileged to be part a group of such dedicated professionals working towards our shared



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objective of an international organization advancing the professions of dental assistants and dental nurses for the mutual benefit of both the profession and society. Together, we are working collaboratively on preparing a draft proposal for establishing an international federation for this profession. I am honored to be working collaboratively with these two women who epitomize professionalism and commitment to their profession. It has been such an enriching experience and I believe that together, we are on the cusp of taking our profession forward into the global sphere.

Marion Edwards, the founder and first President of the Canadian Dental Nurses and Assistants Association, (now known as CDAA) once wrote: "What this National Association proves itself to be, whatever influence it may exercise, whatever it may achieve in future development, will depend on the dental assistant and her vision. How far-reaching are your ambitions for its success? Just in proportion as the dental assistants individually and collectively cooperate with the plans, purposes and ideals of our National Association, just in that proportion will our progress and success be assured" (1945).

We at CDAA believe Ms. Edwards' words are true and extend them to include the global dental assisting community. I look forward with much optimism as our international team continues to advance the profession of dental assisting and dental nursing. ☺

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