



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

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IS DENTISTRY A BUSINESS?

What is the practice of dentistry? The *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (3rd ed) does not define it but defines a *dentist* as a person who is qualified to treat the diseases and conditions that affect the mouth, jaws, teeth, and their supporting tissues, especially the repair and extraction of teeth and the insertion of artificial ones.

A *profession* is defined as a vocation or calling especially one that involves some branch of advanced learning or science. It infers that the members of a profession are a group of skilled practitioners that conduct a vocation providing ethical service which provides a benefit to the community.

It in turn confers a special status upon its members. **Dentistry should therefore be defined as the practice of treating the diseases and conditions that affect the mouth by the profession of dentists for the benefit of the community.** Neither definition refers to the practice being focused upon the conduct of a commercial enterprise.

The Productivity Commission seems intent on removing the *professionalism* from the practice of dentistry and is endeavouring to shift the practice of Dentistry to a commercial footing. **The fact is that the practice of dentistry is not a business enterprise and should not be treated as such.** The practice of Dentistry is **unique**. It involves a very close personal relationship of trust between dentist and patient, where the dentist provides a diverse series of health services.

The Australian Dental Association Inc. (ADA) cautions the Commission that to impose common commercial practices upon the delivery of dental health services is inappropriate and will significantly reduce, and in some cases, eliminate the delivery of dental care to large segments of Australian society.

Dentists undergo extensive training to ensure their delivery of service is at the optimal level. Their training extends to adopting professional and ethical standards in the conduct of their profession. Their primary focus is always their patient's oral health.

Any measures introduced to the delivery of dental care through the Productivity reforms must have as their objective the maintenance of the quality of dental services and the improvement of the oral health of the community. Introduction of competitive measures for competition's sake is not suitable if in doing so, quality of care suffers.

One such proposed measure is the adoption of the "corporatisation" of dentistry by allowing non-dentists (companies and entrepreneurs) to own and conduct dental surgeries. The ADA is concerned that such ownership of dental practices will result in:

- An increased **emphasis on profit** which would inevitably result in reduced servicing standards and levels. Directors of companies have a duty to act in the best interests of the company and this would dominate over the dentists' duty and

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responsibility to their patient. The dentists' relationship with their patient would become secondary. The resultant pursuit of profit would dominate over participation in many dental welfare programs such as Department of Veterans Affairs service to veterans (currently often done at cost by dentists out of respect to the veterans).

- **A loss of focus upon the patient.** The primary obligation of the provider (the dental surgeon) in the provision of health services would be to the company that employs the provider, rather than the provision of the optimal service to the recipient – the patient. There can be no more important role for the health care provider than the delivery of care to the patient. Placing the interests of the patient beneath that of the employer will inevitably lead to a drop in standards.
- **Promotion of profitable types of treatment.** Demand creation in health, including dentistry, is a major threat to the continuation of an effective health service for the community. Increasing resources are currently being devoted to profitable or even “unnecessary” therapies. Strong professional ethics and associations tend to dampen this demand creation on the basis of personal professional integrity.

- **A lowering of professional standards.** Dentists must meet high standards of professional conduct in order to be registered to practise. Their membership of this Association and membership of the profession imposes ethical standards upon their mode of practice. Dentists risk breaching professional standards and loss of registration and ability to practice if they do not adhere to certain levels of conduct. Non-dentists involved in dental practice are not subject to the same accountability mechanisms.

Conclusion

Dental services cannot be compared with the supply of general goods and services which are provided within a market where rational economic models can be applied. Dental services are unique in that the consumer often lacks the knowledge to assess either the quality of the dental service or the expertise of the dentist providing the service. A level of dependency on the part of the consumer exists which can only be sustained with the maintenance of the existing high levels of trust, free of any taint of ‘commercial’ influence.

Let dentistry remain the proud profession it is. Do not let commercialism assume a major role in the provision of this unique health service. To do so will lower standards and quality for no public benefit.