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Professional Self-Governance: CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

By James Casey

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Over the last two decades, successive waves of change have washed over all self-governing professions:

- The public and government have become more sceptical about the societal value of self-governance.
- Competitive pressures have intensified, bringing increased commercialization of the practice of most professions.
- Some members of the current generation of professionals see the traditional professional ideas as unrealistic in light of “new realities.”
- The discipline process for most professions has become more active, complex and expensive.

These massive changes have threatened the survival of professions that are unable to adjust and adapt. Change is the only constant, as professions are expected to undertake an ever-expanding role. Decades ago, the expectations for self-governing professions were relatively modest: set entrance standards for the profession, establish codes of conduct that emphasize collective ethical aspirations, discipline the few genuine miscreants who come to the profession’s attention and encourage a collegial atmosphere among members. Today, in addition to these traditional roles, self-governing professions are often expected to:

- institute mediation procedures to resolve professional disputes
- maintain a sophisticated discipline process capable of processing a high volume of complaints
- establish detailed practice standards for the guidance of members
- maintain close liaisons with government departments
- draft or critique proposed legislation affecting the profession
- establish continuing education programs for members to ensure their competence
- undertake public education campaigns about the profession.

CAP’s annual report indicates the breadth of activities now being undertaken in the psychology profession. CAP’s work includes liaison with other professional organizations, discipline, membership communications, governmental affairs, practice issues, practice standards and registration.

The new Health Professions Act, which will likely be passed into law this spring, will establish a revised regulatory framework for the College of Alberta Psychologists and other professions. Early indications are that this complex Act will increase implementation and administration costs.

All the additional tasks the professions are taking on are important and valuable. However, they put a significant strain on the human and financial resources of

professional organizations. Two of the greatest challenges facing the professions as they prepare to enter the next century will be:

1. developing and maintaining an ethic of volunteerism, and
2. ensuring an adequate level of funding for the professional organization.

It was therefore most appropriate that the first issue of The CAP Monitor (Spring 1997) included a tribute to volunteers. Without a broad base of volunteer support from members, the profession simply will not have the resources to carry out many of its functions adequately. Volunteer support encompasses a wide range of activities, including providing informal input and feedback to the governing body, attending annual conferences and general meetings, and serving on committees and on the governing body.

The best and brightest must be prepared to provide leadership or serve the profession in other ways. We in Canada seem to have a habit of putting our leaders on a pedestal and then throwing stones at them until they fall off. While constructive criticism is necessary in any democratic organization, professions also need to value their leaders and nurture them through encouragement and support.

The second great challenge is maintaining a satisfactory level of financial support. Someone once said it is every Canadian's God-given and inalienable right to complain about the boss. It also appears to be every professional's right to complain about the fees they are required to pay.

The many tasks currently performed by professional bodies require a significant level of financial resources, most of which must come directly from the members. This is as it should be. Strong financial support assists in building a strong profession, and a strong profession is in the members' best long-term interests. Most importantly, a strong profession helps further and protect the public interest. One of the primary advantages of self-governance is that the profession has the ability to control its own destiny. A weak profession that is unable to adequately fulfil its responsibilities may lose the privilege of self-governance.

It is tempting to become nostalgic about a simpler era of professional regulation, but the future cannot be ignored. I believe the professions that have a strong volunteer base and adequate funding will be in the best position to meet the challenges and reap the rewards of an expanding role for the self-governing professions.

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