**CEO Address to IDA AGM**

**April 18th 2024**

Good evening colleagues, I am deeply honoured to address you as the CEO of this great Association.

The past year has been a testament to our resilience, adaptability, and unwavering commitment to the dental profession amidst unprecedented challenges.

There are three key messages I wish to share with you tonight in my brief address: firstly, we must look to the future and the rapidly changing needs of our members, especially younger and early career dentists. Secondly, we must be ready to engage with the state at a time of momentous change as the roll-out of Smile agus Slainte begins. Thirdly, we must continue to prize independent dental practice while simultaneously campaigning to rebuild our public dental service.

To begin, I want to recognise your tireless efforts in promoting oral health and providing essential dental care. You have made a profound difference in the lives of countless individuals across Ireland.

Last year we celebrated the Association’s rich history in many different ways but now it is time to look to the future. What will dentistry and the Association look like in 2040?

Our focus now must be on listening to early career dentists and the next generation of dentists while also identifying the massive changes being navigated by our members and the ways in which the Association can help our members.

The Irish Dental Association has always remained steadfast in its mission to advocate for the highest standards of patient care, professional excellence, and ethical practice.

Over the past fortnight I have attended meetings with the Dental Council, with the Department of Health and with Sinn Fein health spokesperson, Mr David Cullinane, as well as speaking with senior HSE representatives and others. I firmly believe that we are on the cusp of real change and we will finally see long overdue reform of dental legislation and significant changes with the roll-out of the oral health policy, Smile agus Slainte.

If I am correct then we can take pride as an Association in that this change has been forced on the Government by the relentless advocacy, media work and public affairs of the Irish Dental Association, the only voice for dentistry in Ireland.

In preparing to negotiate change it is only right that we learn from our own experiences but also those of other professional representative bodies here and abroad.

When we look back at our own experience over many years or elsewhere (such as in the UK or in Canada at present), we know that we can be certain that we will be frustrated engaging with the political system.

When we reach that inevitable stage, we can choose to respond in a number of ways. We have seen those who choose to simply vent their frustration online, who vilify the politicians and choose to simply transmit their anger rather than come to the table with the state. Understandable but easy reactions.

As an Association we need to be clear about what can be achieved with the strategic approach we adopt. We know that we could choose to refuse to have any dealings with the state, but what will that achieve? The hard-earned support we enjoy with the public and with many politicians will be lost for a start.

There is a danger that the state will impose worse on the profession, will wind up state schemes and issue contracts without the support of the Association, as we have seen it do with hospital consultants in recent times. We can be certain that there will be little progress made in updating dental legislation or addressing the many flaws in the state dental schemes or in the problems facing our beleaguered public dental service.

What’s worse is that we know also that the state can and will introduce legislation which will impose further damage on the profession rather than the type of legislative reform we want which supports the profession, protects patients and regulates for the highest standard of care.

Ignoring the power of the state or refusing to engage with the state is not a credible strategy. What is more challenging is to persevere and to engage with the politicians and the public servants with a combination of applying pressure, attempting to persuade, to appeal to reason, to present cogent arguments and alternative solutions to those which have been developed by the state. That is the approach we have taken in the last year and of course it is intensely frustrating.

Progress has been made but of course it has not been perfect. I salute those dentists who have shown real leadership on behalf of their colleagues and who have played their part in talks with the state and its representatives, with the politicians and the media.

As we reflect on the past year, it is important to acknowledge the tremendous strides we have made as an organisation.

From providing best in class CPD and supporting our members with valuable resources and guidance to championing initiatives aimed at improving access to dental care for underserved populations, our collective efforts have underscored the indispensable role of the dental profession in promoting public health and well-being.

As an Association, we promote independent dental practice for many compelling reasons. Independent dental practice will form the cornerstone of our approach to reform in all branches of dentistry. Why is it so important?

Truly independent dental practice provides dentists with clinical autonomy and control in their practice, flexibility to tailor services your patients need, the opportunity to provide real patient-centred care, the option to build and grow your practice with the entrepreneurial model you prefer. It brings financial benefits and higher earnings potential.

It allows you to decide on your work-life balance, how you can be fulfilled professionally and as an active citizen in your community. That is why we advocate independent dental practice.

A hallmark of the Association has been its commitment to supporting publicly provided care for those who need it most, for our children, vulnerable and deprived patients.

We will be just as committed in the coming year to developing a better model of care within the public service and in collaboration with private dentists, while making no apologies for campaigning to have the public service rebuilt. All our members want to provide the best care in a new model, where all dentists are proud to come to work and to provide the best care they can in an environment where they are supported and appreciated.

Looking ahead, the Association is faced with new opportunities and challenges that require our collective attention and concerted action. From supporting our members and the many pressures they face, advancing oral health education and preventive care initiatives to advocating for policies that promote equitable access to dental services, there is so much work to be done to ensure the continued growth and prosperity of our profession.

In the coming year, the Irish Dental Association will continue to be the leading voice in shaping the future of dentistry in Ireland.

We will strive to foster collaboration and innovation, empower our members with the knowledge and resources they need to thrive in a rapidly evolving healthcare landscape, and advocate tirelessly on behalf of our profession and the patients we serve.

In closing, I want to reiterate my profound appreciation for your unwavering dedication and commitment to excellence. Together, we have the power to make a lasting impact on the oral health of our communities and shape a brighter future for generations to come.

I wish to thank the board and Eamon as your President, all of our Committee members and especially my colleagues in the team in IDA House. I look forward to working with Rory as your President and the new board and officers for what should be a roller coaster of a year.

Thank you for your continued support, and I look forward to working closely with each of you in the year ahead.

**ENDS**