An historic event took place at the 2001 Canadian Digestive Diseases Week (CDDW) meeting. The Canadian Association of Gastroenterology (CAG) fully endorsed and embraced the Canadian Digestive Diseases Foundation (CDDF) as its fundraising foundation. This relationship provides the CAG with a powerful vehicle to raise the profile of gastrointestinal diseases to the public, and to both federal and provincial governments. Over the past several years, the CAG has demonstrated outstanding leadership in providing educational events to its membership. Furthermore, the CAG has raised funds largely from industry to support studentships, fellowships, research grants and continuing medical education for CAG members. Having been so successful, why the need for the CDDF? Well, first of all, our success in raising funds for education and research ($1.5 million/year) pales in comparison with that of other agencies, including the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the Kidney Foundation of Canada. In addition, although members of the CAG have participated in patient educational events, these have been limited, and have largely been industry initiated and focused on limited themes. We have been largely unsuccessful in informing the public and government about the importance of diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, which are common and a cause of significant morbidity and mortality to the Canadian public. Furthermore, as Dr Ivan Beck, a founding member of the CDDF and past president of the CAG has pointed out in a recent article (1), gastrointestinal diseases are common and a cause of significant health expenditure and days lost from work, yet are largely ignored by the nonpharmaceutical industry and government agencies. Indeed, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research largely ignored the importance of disease of the gastrointestinal system in its recent restructuring, and at provincial levels, governments have largely ignored recommendations from provincial gastrointestinal organizations for the treatment of gastroesophageal reflux, dyspepsia and colon cancer screening.

We can learn much from our cardiology, endocrinology and nephrology colleagues. If we are going to get the support of the public, we must first educate them. Also, who will train new leaders and lobby government? This will only happen if we muster the support and energy of our constituency – the public. The Juvenile Diabetes Society just raised in excess of $100 million to provide increased education and find a cure for diabetes. Are public education and research into gastrointestinal diseases such as ileitis and colitis, gastrointestinal cancer, and even dyspepsia and irritable bowel disease less worthy of funding than coronary artery disease, hypertension and kidney disease?

The mandate of the CDDF is not to compete with existing agencies, including the Canadian Liver Foundation, the Cystic Fibrosis Society, and the Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation, but rather to enhance their activities. We have begun a dialogue to establish a Canadian Health Foundation – an umbrella organization that will allow coordination of activities, including fundraising, education and government lobbying.

So why should the membership of the CAG support the CDDF? As a famous theologian said, “If we don’t, who will?” If we are to reach out to the public, we must show the public that we are committed to research and education into diseases of the gastrointestinal system. Therefore, part of the reason to write to the general membership is to request that we all generously support ‘our foundation’. Remember that, in supporting the CDDF, indirectly we will be setting in motion a force that will enhance public support for the work that we all do, whether that be clinical care, research or education. We cannot ask industry and the public to support our interests if we do not ourselves demonstrate commitment and support. Also remember that your generous donation is tax deductible.

So I hope all of you will embrace the CDDF as an opportunity to enhance the profile of gastroenterology and hepatology. Remember, if we don’t support our work, we cannot expect others to.

We look forward to your comments and support.

REFERENCE

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President, CAG

and

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