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**EDITORIAL**

The International Dental Ethics and Law Society (IDEALS), held its 2014 biennial Congress in September in Cape Town and the papers published in this supplement were some of the presentations made at that event. The society is a multi-disciplinary group including dentists, philosophers, lawyers and social scientists with a common interest in international dental ethics and law. The 2014 Congress had the theme of *Patient Rights: Limits to Autonomy*. The 37 papers, and 5 invited speakers provided a wide and varied approach to the Congress theme. Many disciplines were represented and speakers came from 10 countries. The size of the congress permitted and indeed encouraged meaningful discussion during the sessions and in the breaks between sessions. The varied oral presentations included scientific research, reviews on current laws, discussion papers and case studies and are reflected in this supplement.

Attendance at conferences is a vital part of professional activities especially for academics and for those involved in framing regulations, as well as fulfilling the continuing professional development requirements for professional registration. Given that most members of societies like IDEALS have interests in more than one discipline and maintain several roles, making a choice of what to attend becomes a perennial balancing act. Although technology offers wonderful opportunities to interact with colleagues all over the world, it supports and enhances the face-to-face contacts made at meeting rather than replacing them. There is something unique and special about being able to watch and feel the reaction of one's colleagues whilst debating, discussing, and presenting one's own ideas, to have those ideas probed and challenged with immediate reply and counter-reply. Meetings establish relations and promote introductions that may later be nurtured via technology with fewer misunderstandings.

International organizations - even those with a wide range of members - seem to have a majority of members in Europe and North America. It is therefore not surprising that most of the international meetings occur in either of these continents. The choice is made on the basis of numbers - more members can afford to attend local meetings than to travel long distances. Countries that host meetings and those that are nearby provide the bulk of participants at these events supported by a solid core of existing active members. The decision to hold the meeting in South Africa was taken with the anticipation that attendance from the northern hemisphere may be constrained by distance plus the time and cost to individuals. However, it was also

made with the knowledge that these costs are borne routinely by members south of the equator and attendance for this group is limited to the few people who can justify the costs.

Providing a meeting in Cape Town enabled local registrants to attend and to present their papers in an environment that reflected both the culture and challenges faced by South Africans. It also offered a relevant context for visiting participants to gain an understanding of the different solutions and approaches taken. The main theme of *Patient Rights: Limits to Autonomy* fitted appropriately into a congress in South Africa after two decades since a constitution was enacted to replace and repair a tumultuous period of human rights abuse.

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