It is my pleasure to begin my communications through the Bulletin as your president for the coming year. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I thank Dr. Pierre Beauséjour for his years of leadership and service to the CPA. He ended his term as chair of the Board at the annual general meeting on November 2, 2003. I also extend my appreciation to Dr. Blake Woodside for his leadership in the past year and for his mentoring to help me serve effectively on your behalf.

At the AGM, we passed an important milestone when members approved changes to the bylaws that begin the modernization of CPA governance. A review of the Board’s strategic directions was also initiated in Halifax. This exercise demonstrated the diverse perspectives within our profession regarding the priorities for the national association. The Board’s task over the next few months will be to establish a new strategic plan that will allow the CPA to pursue the most important issues affecting the profession while working within its financial means. A few objectives are clear priorities:

1. To work with the education organizations and the academies on a postgraduate education strategy, including the recognition of child, geriatric and forensic subspecialties.
2. To strengthen member services, especially in the area of continuing professional development and increasing CPA membership.
3. To secure the financial viability of the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry.
4. To refocus the CPA advocacy agenda on priority psychiatry concerns, such as primary care reform, human resources, and the promotion of mental health research and disability insurance, while continuing to contribute to Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) efforts to present a unified national voice on mental health and secure a national action plan on mental illness and mental health for Canada. (Thank you to Dr. David Goldbloom for organizing the special policy forum at the AGM. This forum allowed psychiatrists to hear from Senator Michael Kirby regarding initial findings of the mental health study being conducted by the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology.)
5. To grow the CPA Foundation to achieve more flexible and independent funding of priority education and research initiatives.

In the coming year, I hope to guide our association through the changes occurring in practice, among patients, and in societal attitudes toward mental illness, as reflected in my presidential theme, “Culture and Mental Health: Not a Minor Matter.” In 28 years of clinical practice, I have seen the mosaic of my clients change, and I have recognized the limitations of mainstream Western psychiatric education when working with patients from diverse cultures. According to Statistics Canada, 18.38% of the population in 2001 were born outside Canada; 17.5% of the population spoke neither of the two official languages.

We have to look more closely at what it means to be culturally sensitive in psychiatry, and we have to ensure that we respect cultural differences and ethnicity. Appreciation for and knowledge of a patient’s cultural context are essential to evaluating patient needs, making a diagnosis and working with the patient through an appropriate treatment plan. As an association, we have to recognize more fully the cultural diversity of Canadian patients—we must take an active interest in transcultural psychiatry if we are to uphold our responsibilities to our most vulnerable citizens.

One important step is to develop a national plan for eliminating ethnic disparities in mental health services. To achieve this goal, we must first better understand the role of culture and ethnicity and do away with obstacles that keep anyone with mental health problems from seeking or receiving effective treatment. Clinicians must also become conscious of their own cultural background and identity and reflect on how this may be perceived by patients of different backgrounds. I therefore encourage members with interest and special knowledge in this area to submit abstracts for next year’s annual meeting program.

As I visit each provincial psychiatric association over the course of the year, I look forward to meeting you and to sharing your ideas about my theme, about the future of our specialty and about the CPA. Please do not hesitate to contact me, should you have questions or comments about your association. I can be reached through the CPA head office at 1-800-267-1555 ext. 232 or by e-mail at president@cpa-apc.org.