

# LAW MATTERS

ISSN 1704-9377



Volume 30 Number 2 April 2005

A PUBLICATION OF THE CANADIAN BAR ASSOCIATION ALBERTA



CANADIAN BAR ASSOCIATION ALBERTA

# President's REPORT

Walter Pavlic



## Public Legal Education –

### What Is It And Why Should We Care About It?

We've all been there – you're talking to an acquaintance at a cocktail party, or to a relative at a family reunion, or to a neighbour at the soccer pitch – they know you're a lawyer and invariably the conversation turns to the news of the day. Before too long you're talking about issues related to the judicial system. Sometimes the talk is about runaway jury awards, other times it's about convicted criminals getting either too lenient or too harsh a sentence, often it is something about the "Charter". Whatever the particular topic being discussed, it usually becomes rapidly apparent that the person you are talking to has a misconception or a misunderstanding as to what the judicial system is and how it operates.

This misunderstanding should really come as no surprise as the public has been hard pressed to readily obtain accurate information as to how the Canadian judicial system works. Most Canadians get their only legal education from television shows such as *Law and Order*, *LA Law* or *CSI Miami*. These dramatized programs usually show complex legal matters dealt with in short order, based upon laws in the United States and frequently inaccurately portray evidentiary principles.

Without a proper understanding of the operation of the Canadian justice system, Canadians are prone to inaccurately comment upon or criticize judicial proceedings. Further, special interest groups and politicians unfamiliar with the workings of the judicial system often pressure for amendments to legislation that may ultimately harm the manner in which justice is administered.

The CBA has recognized the importance of public legal education in the functioning of the legal system and is taking significant steps to educate the public. These include:

1. **Law Day.** Every year a day in April is designated as Law Day in Canada. In Alberta, the activities are organized by the CBA with funding from the Alberta Law Foundation and The Law Society of Alberta. Law Day provides an opportunity for members of the public to be exposed to the justice system. Courthouses across the country hold an open house where Law Day volunteers, including lawyers and judges, participate in mock trials, legal skits and provide tours of the Courthouse. Affiliated organizations also provide displays and demonstrations. By exposing the public to the physical setting of the Courts and by providing educational programs, the public gains a better understanding of the judicial system. Law Day is always very well received by the public and attendance continues to grow each passing year.
2. **Speaker's Bureau.** The Alberta Branch of the CBA is also coordinating a speaker's bureau in partnership with Alberta Justice, Alberta Learning, and the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice. This speaker's bureau will provide volunteer lawyers and judges to speak at schools in Alberta. Their presentations will be coordinated with the new curriculum changes from Alberta Learning, which will be implemented commencing for grade three in September, 2005. These changes will provide a legal education component to the curriculum of all students in Alberta commencing with the elementary grades and continuing through to high school.
3. **Educational Videos.** The CBA Law for the Future Fund made a grant to the Canadian Superior Courts Judges Association to produce videos and interactive on-line learning tools which demonstrate various scenarios and pose questions for the observers. These videos are targeted at high school students and are intended to be used in educational programming. These videos are high quality and pose thought provoking questions.

It is through these types of programs that the CBA attempts to better inform the public on the workings of the judicial system and it is through such public legal education initiatives that an understanding as to the quality and caliber of our judicial system can be imparted upon Canadians. In fact, the Canadian judicial system is the envy of much of the world and the CBA has, through its international development programs, provided Canadian lawyers to foreign lands to assist them in the development and establishment of their judicial systems. Recent initiatives by the CBA's International Development Committee have taken place in the Ukraine, the former Yugoslavia, Vietnam and China.

What can you do to help with public legal education? You can volunteer to assist with Law Day, or put your name on the list for the public legal education speaker's bureau. When the opportunity provides itself, you can also make efforts to inform your friends and neighbours about the way the Canadian judicial system operates in order that they too can appreciate its significance to our society.

### MUNICIPAL LAWYERS BECOME BALD LEGALS Cancer Research Fundraiser

Lawyers shave their heads on Thursday, April 28, 2005 at 3:45 at the Winspear in Edmonton and 12:00 noon at the Plaza Level, Municipal Building in Calgary. You will not likely have seen this newsletter before the events but we e-mailed all of you and hope you joined in. In the June issue, we will publish an account of the fundraiser and some lovely photos too!