

# Phoney-physician furore leads to massive credentials check

Barbara Sibbald

**T**he highly publicized case involving an imposter who practised medicine in Canada without a licence has had a far-reaching impact. Since the unveiling of American Dennis Roark as a fraud, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario has sent letters to 820 medical schools around the world in an attempt to verify the credentials of all 25 000 of its registered members. The University of Western Ontario (UWO), where Roark hung out his shingle for 7 months, is also checking the credentials of its medical applicants more closely and is seeking advice from the RCMP on how to avoid Roark-type frauds in the future.

But the UWO's dean of medicine, Dr. Robert McMurtry, wonders whether these measures can end the problem. "There's no absolute protection against a determined forger," he warns. And Dennis Roark was just that. Roark, 39, pretended he was a physician for more than a decade, fooling top-level medical authorities in the US and at UWO and the Ontario college. Even his parents and wife were duped into thinking he had earned a medical degree from Chicago's Rush University Medical College in 1986. During the 1990s Roark was a resident at 3 Ohio and Michigan medical institutions, where he observed or assisted in hundreds of operations, including at least 1 bypass procedure. In September 1995 he was accepted as a fifth-year heart-surgery resident at UWO's London Health Sciences Centre. He failed a performance review 7 months later and quit.

McMurtry says Roark was accepted in the program because he was an expert forger and had completed other residency posts; he had hung around hospitals long enough to pick up the basic medical information he needed. He was finally caught when he applied to the Ingham Regional Medical Center in Lansing, Mich., late last year. In April he was charged with 2 felony-fraud charges that could have put him in prison for 14 years, but in a July plea bargain a charge was dropped in exchange for a guilty plea to a felony charge of representing a fake document as authentic. So far, Roark has been fined \$150 000.

Although the case is wrapping up in the US, its ramifications linger on here. The Ontario college is now waiting for responses from its letters to 16 Canadian medical schools and more than 800 outside Canada. Jill Hefley, the college's manager of public affairs and communications, says no deadline was set for responses but they're already hearing from some schools. "We hope to wrap up the process by early fall," she says.

McMurtry wonders what incentive foreign schools have to respond. "What will the response rate be," he asks, "and then what will [the college] do?"

Dr. Bill Easton, chair of CMA's Council on Medical Education, says he doesn't see anything wrong with the present policies for checking credentials. "It's hard to nab people like Roark," he says. "Those who find a way around [the system] are clever." Indeed, in mid-August another phoney physician was uncovered by the college, this time in Hamilton.

As a result of Roark, both UWO and the Ontario college are striving to improve procedures for checking credentials. The college plans to present proposed improvements at its October council meeting. It registers between 800 and 1000 new physicians annually. The UWO has already increased its scrutiny of people entering subspecialty training. These students pose a higher risk, says McMurtry, because they apply personally, while physicians applying through the Canadian Resident Matching Service present a low risk. "The system is time consuming, but it will never be fool proof," he says. "But this is a tremendous issue. The general public must feel confident in the system." ?



## Features

## Chroniques

**Barbara Sibbald is CMAJ's Associate Editor, News and Features.**

CMAJ 1998;159:557